

3

The Death Mage

Densuke

Illustrations by Ban!

ONE PEACE BOOKS





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Summary

In his second reincarnation, Vandal was born in the world of Ramda as a dhampir. While suffering under numerous curses, he still found a measure of happiness living with his dark elf mother Dalshia. One day, however, she was tortured and killed. Vandal found her in town, already a spirit, about to vanish completely. He used the death attribute magic obtained during his second life to place her spirit into a remaining fragment of her bone. He then swore vengeance on high priest Goldan and the others who killed her.

After making new allies, enhancing his undead, and taking his first steps toward revenge on Evbejia, Vandal and his party took to the road. They encountered the ghoulish elder Zadilis and saved her from an attack by adventurers. They entered a demon barren in order to get Zadilis home and found themselves unexpectedly welcome in the Ghoulish Grotto. Vandal settled down in the grotto for a while in order to train, and then made a big contribution by helping to defeat the Kobold King Gyahn, who attacked with designs on expanding his own domain.

After the battle, Vandal remained in the grotto to learn non-attribute magic from Zadilis. He became closer to the ghouls as he helped solve Zadilis's issues with old age, as well as infertility among the ghouls. This peaceful interlude was shattered by the Noble Orc Bugogan and his army of orcs. Vigaro and the other ghouls begged Vandal to help them in their battle against this threat, and Vandal became a Ghoulish King as a result. With Vandal as their king, the ghouls were blessed with new weapons, magical items, and attribute enhancements. Even with their inferior numbers, they managed to defeat the orcs. Rather than face an oncoming conflict with their human pursuers, however, Vandal decided to lead his new companions away in search of fresh pastures.





VANDAL

Hiroto Amamiya after his second rebirth. A dhampir born from a vampire father and a dark elf mother, he possesses massive magical power and a command of death attribute magic. He became a Ghoul King after saving their grotto from disaster.



DALSHIA

Vandal's mother. She suffered a terrible death, but Vandal used his death attribute magic to bind her to one of her own bones, keeping her in the world as a spirit.



BASDIA

Zadilis's daughter. A female warrior with an athletic, honed frame that also features feminine curves. She has taken a liking to Vandal.



ZADILIS

The elder of the Ghoul Grotto. She appears to be a young woman but is 290 years old. Perhaps held back by her physical appearance, her mental age is not as advanced as her years.



VIGARO

The next chief of the Ghoul Grotto. Trusted implicitly by the young male ghouls and adored by the females, he's a ghoul with everything going for him. He is also Basdia's father.



SAM

A Ghost Carriage. Originally a servant killed by bandits and left to wander as a spirit. After Vandal avenged his death, Sam chose him as his new master and swore loyalty to him.



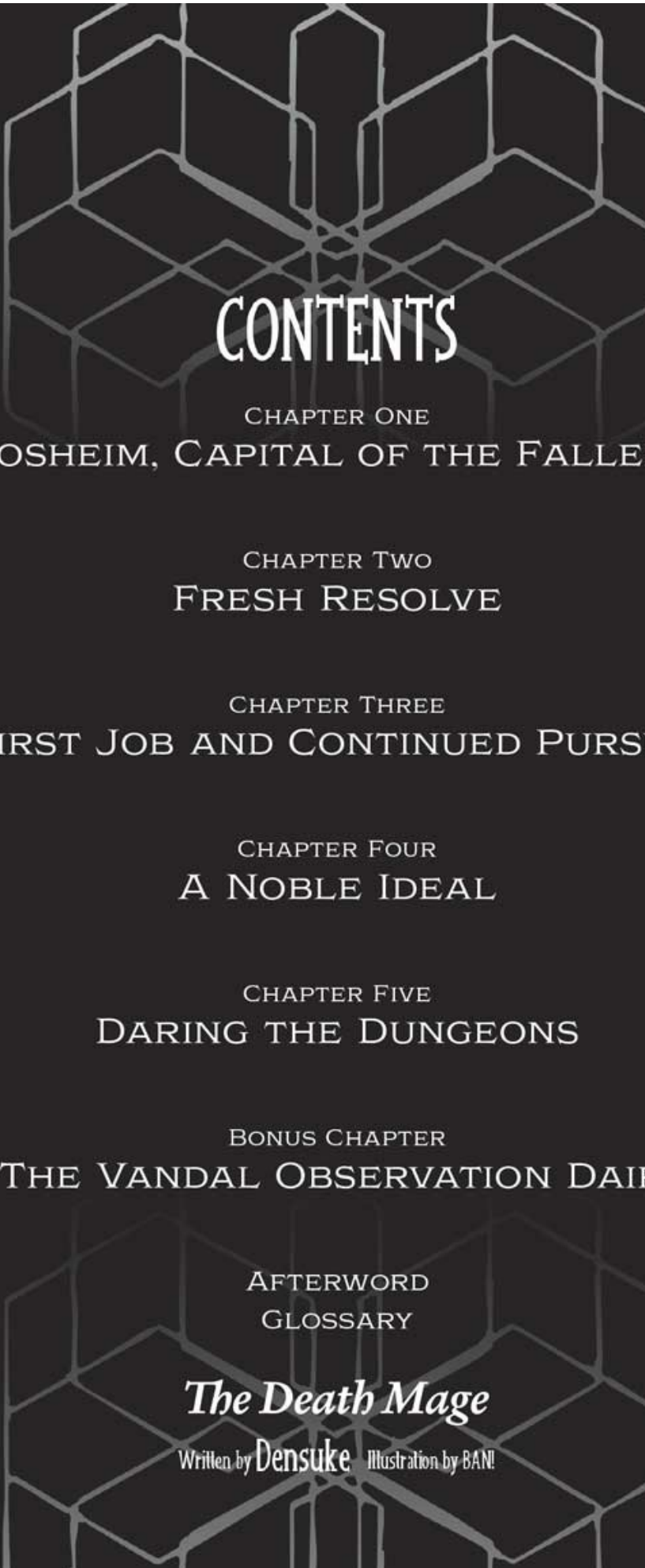
TALEA

A former human, now a ghoul, who hitches her wagon to Vandal's after his rise as king. Has significant skill with making armor and weapons.



SARIA & RITA

Sam's daughters, who are also spirits. They received living armor found in a dungeon treasure room as their bodies, so they look like nothing more than empty armor.



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The Death Mage

Written by Densuke Illustration by BAN!

The Death Mage

CHAPTER ONE

TALOSHEIM,
CAPITAL OF THE FALLEN SUN

Chapter One: Talosheim, Capital of the Fallen Sun

As Marshal Palpapekk expected, the scouts he had sent out in pursuit of the ghouls turned back soon after entering the Boundary Mountains.

Their report was a strange one. They had found tracks on the side of steep mountainside that no wagon should normally be able to traverse. Perhaps the dhampir had turned his wagons into some kind of magical item? But no, there was no precedent for that.

“But they have definitely crossed the mountains,” Thomas Palpapekk said with a shrug. “We can’t pursue them any farther.”

This report had been than enough for him to completely give up on chasing down the dhampir. Hunting the creature was hardly a top priority for him. Even if he failed, the vampires were never going to cut him loose. It wasn’t going to get him killed. His position as Marshal and rank as Count would remain unassailable. He would just have to help the vampires in some other way, putting up with the dung from the State Bursar and dealing with the hostile political situation. That would be enough.

Of course, he was angry at the dhampir, and his pride had taken a blow. But Thomas Palpapekk was beyond the age at which he did anything without the prospects of suitable reward.

“That’s the situation, I’m afraid. There’s nothing more I can do to help with this dhampir,” Thomas explained, expression calm, to the vampiric familiar that was visiting him again at the moment. He felt safe in adopting such a stance because, while the vampire was sure to have some barbed words, it surely would understand that pursuing the dhampir was now impossible. He figured

that killing the abomination couldn't be that high a priority for them, either.

"You estimate that the dhampir has become a Ghoul King and has now led his ghouls away across the mountains?" came the irritated reply.

It wasn't the response Thomas had been expecting. "Correct," he said.

"Then this could be a problem. Hey. You really can't do anything more? No chance of anything at all?" There was some panic creeping into the vampire's voice as it emitted from the familiar.

That was something Thomas had definitely not been expecting. The situation was starting to sound like it was more important than he had presumed.

"Can't you get some adventurers out there, or those crazy religious fanatics? There must be something."

"You really must be in a corner, suggesting things that you know all too well are impossible," Thomas replied. Money was all it would take to place such a quest with the adventurers' guild, true, circumventing the need to deploy soldiers and knights. But Thomas couldn't imagine any adventurers would take the job involving chasing hundreds of ghouls and their dhampir leader across already treacherous mountains, which also happened to be filled with demon barrens, and then—even if they defeated them—also having to make it back again. He could offer up his entire estate and none would take the job.

Then there was the "crazy fanatic," High Priest Goldan. He might have pursued the dhampir, if given the opportunity, but the church had already convinced him to move on to the next holy mission.

"Whatever is the matter? Is there something about this dhampir I should know?" Thomas asked.

"Nothing that concerns you, no," came the angry reply. The vampire made no

attempt to conceal general disgruntlement, and then the familiar flew out of the open window.

Thomas frowned with puzzlement, but it seemed safest to take the vampire at his word. He had dealings with these creatures, but they didn't share all their secrets with him. Indeed, there was probably plenty it was better that he didn't know. There had to be *something* going on with this dhampir—how else could a babe not only survive, but thrive, becoming the leader of a bunch of ghouls? But for Marshal Thomas in his military duties, that “something” was not worthy of concern. They faced threats from the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom and plenty of other powerful monsters. Adding one more to the pile meant little at this point in time. It wasn't to be celebrated, but he was hardly on his knees in terror. All Thomas needed to do was continue to raise their military strength, maintaining a balance with economic strength, and keep their guard up. If they could manage that, there would be nothing to fear. Regardless of the strength this dhampir and his rabble of ghouls attained, they would never become a threat equal to, say, a high-level dragon capable of destroying a fortress in an instant.

Marshal Thomas Palpapekk realized that the tea in his cup had gone cold.

He called in a servant to fill it back up. He drank his tea and paused for a moment.

It sounded like the vampire might be busy for a while longer. Thomas decided to take a break.

The vampire, whose familiar had flown from the Marshal's window, was one Sercrent Ozba. He was a dandy fellow, with an appearance suited to his position in vampire society. In that moment, however, he was clicking his tongue,

scratching his head, and irritably swirling the red liquid in his glass.

“This is bad! Really bad! Worthless scum!”

If any other vampires had seen Sercrent, grinding his fangs with a horrible scraping noise, they might have questioned his standing. He didn’t have time to worry about manners in that moment, however.

Just as Thomas Palpapekk had assumed, the emergence of a dhampir was hardly a threat to those vampires who followed the evil gods. It was simply something that happened. If one of the parents were a progenitor species, perhaps it would be of greater import, but if the vampiric parent were only a noble or subordinate species then the child was of no consequence. Both parents would be put to death, to set an example, and the ones who performed the execution would be richly rewarded by those above them. It was little more than a game.

But there were some exceptions.

Sercrent’s own maker, one of the progenitor species, had ordered him to prevent the following circumstances at any cost: allowing dhampirs to mature, allowing them to build their own forces, or allowing one to reach the south of the Vangaia Continent—the so-called “handle of the Warhammer.”

An adult dhampir could obtain the combat strength of their parent vampire while suffering from almost none of those innate vampiric disadvantages, creating a potentially powerful foe. If they were allowed to build their own forces, that foundation could become a powerful organization. An entire country had once been wiped out by such a force, including the vampire community that had subsisted in its shadows. The world at large didn’t know that a dhampir mercenary was behind it, but among the vampires it was a well-known and highly cautionary story.

Furthermore, the south of the continent was where the vampires who still worshipped the Goddess Vida were to be found. There weren't a large number of them, but the majority were surviving progenitor species. Some rumors even suggested that there was at least one among them who fought alongside the true source, Divine Alda, and the heroes tens-of-thousands of years ago.

If a dhampir teamed up with the Vida faction, it could even lead to conflict between the two sides. To Sercrent, their disgusting notion of accepting even mixed bloods as the children of Vida meant there was no telling what those vampires might do.

None of this should have ended up being a problem. Sercrent had taken care of the subordinate species who fathered this problem, a traitor with little going for him other than resistance to sunlight. He had fed information on the mother, the dark elf, to Marshal Palpapekk, resulting in the fanatics burning her at the stake. They had failed to confirm the demise of the dhampir himself, but a baby that couldn't even feed itself would surely have perished.

Surely. But then he had heard about it alive, out in the demon barrens, and leading a horde of ghouls. He mobilized the Marshal's forces, feeling a little on edge, but still convinced that would be the end of it. There had been no need for him to handle this himself, or even send some of his more powerful underlings.

However, Sercrent had underestimated the situation. The dhampir had taken his ghouls and managed to cross the mountains. They might have slipped past the eyes of the Marshal's scouts and proceeded along the foothills instead, but it was too dangerous to float that possibility without any evidence.

"Shitty little mixed blood mutt! How are you doing things so out of order?!"

Before even maturing, the baby had established his own force and crossed

those dangerous mountains! Vandal would have replied that it was the vampire's own pursuit that was driving him to achieve such feats, but that didn't help matters. Sercrent still had to report to the noble species vampires who were above him. He adjusted his collar and smoothed out his hair.

He didn't want to report this failure—of course not. But he was himself bound by powerful magic that prevented him from keeping such matters quiet. Even if Sercrent was the one pulling the strings behind Count Thomas Palpapekk, Marshal of the Milg Shield Kingdom, he was himself only one vampiric cog in a far larger machine.



“Oh, you poor fools!” Talea snapped. “You really can’t do a thing, can you? There’s still flesh on this wyvern skin, and this needle wolf pelt is full of holes!” Once they left the mountains, she had quickly recovered her energetic disposition. “You used your claws again, didn’t you? I told you to use a knife for skinning work! Or maybe just chew it in your jaws next time!” Talea recovered to such a degree that she was almost a different person.

Vandal wondered if maybe it had just been altitude sickness after all. She had been so weak, however, and she was old. He decided to use Rejuvenation on her once things settled down.

“Okay, everyone,” Vandal finally said. “It’s time to take a look around this demon barren.”

He had taken the night to recover his MP, and the plan was for them to now scout around a little before the whole troop headed into the demon barren

ruins. He could have used the Lemures and bug undead to do it, but in many cases, it was better to see things for himself. He also needed to find out how many of the undead already here could be brought under his control.

He had put together a party of himself, Sam, Saria, Rita, Skeleton Bird, Zadilis, and a few of the rank 4+ ghouls. He was leaving the ghoul warriors, led by Vigaro, and then Bone Monkey and the other undead behind in defense.

“Leave to us! Safe with us!” Vigaro said loudly.

“You’d better come back safe, Van. It’s a man’s job to hunt, find food, and come back to where the women are waiting,” Basdia added.

“I understand. You take care of everyone, Basdia,” Vandal replied. He also made sure the Living Dead would be taken care of, and then Vandal and his party set out. It might have looked like they were heading off on some kind of crazy picnic, but every member of the group understood the responsibility placed on them.

The demon barren ruins they were about to enter needed to provide enough food to sustain a total of close to 600 ghouls and monsters. Vandal was the one who had brought them all here. He could use death attribute magic to prevent the decay of food, allowing it to be preserved at the cost of nothing more than MP, and there was water flowing down from the mountains through the ruined canals of the city, so the situation didn’t exactly look dire, but they had to make sure of everything first.

“If you get so stiff, boy, your shoulders will tense up,” Zadilis said. “Look, they already are, boy.”

“Ah, that’s good . . . right there, that’s heaven,” Vandal gasped. An onlooker would have witnessed the crazy sight of a toddler soon to turn three getting his

shoulders massaged by a 293-year-old ghoul, although fully rejuvenated. Vandal's eyes were almost closing, the pleasure washing over him even as he considered how this might be his first-ever shoulder massage.

"Enough." Vandal snapped back to himself. "We're departing, not settling down for a nap. Sam, head out." He used his passive skill Resist Maladies to instantly blow off the sleepies.

Of course, young master, Sam replied. With that, Vandal and the gang headed out into the demon barren ruins.

The demon barren ruins were like a mix of two different demon barrens. From the center, Vandal sensed nothing other than vines and moss. This area was surrounded by a second zone, ruins that were gradually being consumed by forest. The difference between these two areas suggested that the monsters that appeared would be different as well.

This hypothesis was quickly proven correct.

"Zzzugaaaah!" With a strange screech, a monster that looked like a ten-foot wolf with countless needles along its back came racing toward them. This type of monster had popped up numerous times as they crossed the mountains; they had taken to calling it a "needle wolf." They were around rank 3, and despite the wolfy appearance they always seemed to appear alone, foregoing pack living.

The beast fell to the ground with a squeal. They were violent, yes, but also dumb. Regular adventurers might have issues with those teeth and claws, and the hide that had turned into needles, but this one was already no match for the Living Bikini Armor Rita.

The meat from needle wolves was also pretty delicious, while the fur from their underside was soft and fluffy and made great clothing and blankets.

“I just had a thought,” Vandal said. “Maybe this isn’t a wolf that looks like a hedgehog, but a hedgehog that looks like a wolf?”

Indeed. They don’t seem to form packs, Sam agreed. In either case, a single one was worth almost 200 kilograms of food, including the internal organs that needed additional processing. That made them good game.

As they were draining the blood from the needle wolf, this time the river—the canal—exploded upward in a spray of water. Incredibly enough, three sharks more than six feet long leapt out of the water and then flew directly at the party, gaping open mouths lined with teeth.

“No way!” the ghouls exclaimed.

“Stop flying, fish!” Zadilis took the initiative, using Spatial Stab to smash one of the sharks with a fist made of air.

Vandal used an overcharged MP Shot to explode the head of the second one, and Rita used Flicker Flash with her glaive to chop off the head of the third.

Dad, I’ve never seen such a big fish before, Rita commented.

This might be one of those dolphins that I’ve heard about. Or even a whale, Sam replied.

“Sam, you are such a reservoir of knowledge. In our demon barren, there were few large fish, or even water monsters of any kind. Still, a flying whale should not be surprising all of you!” Zadilis chastised. “What did you rank up for?!”

“I’m sorry, Elder!”

“Flying whale no scare ghoul again!”

“Er, those were actually sharks?” Vandal said.

Sam only had the knowledge he had picked up from others, and Zadilis and the other ghouls had only seen small fish, meaning it fell to Vandal to explain. He had seen a few shlocky B movies like this while he was still on Earth; he designated these monsters “flying sharks.”

“No more bleeding prey out near the waterways,” he suggested. Sharks were sensitive to the smell of blood, meaning they might have to keep on fighting them if they continued this work here. Death attribute magic could stop all decay anyway, so the draining did little to help with carrying the kill, other than making the bodies lighter.

They moved the shark with the exploded head away from the waterway, carved it up, took the fin and liver, then bundled it into the back of Sam along with the needle wolf.

What do you want the fin for, young master? Sam asked.

“With the correct preparation, it can become a foodstuff that’s also good for your looks,” Vandal explained. It involved skinning the fin and then drying it out, if he remembered correctly. Vandal was thrilled at this chance to eat such a delicacy. As for the liver, he didn’t expect to get much oil from it, as this obviously wasn’t a deepwater shark.

They headed deeper into the demon barren, seeking the area where they might find some undead. Just as they were passing a collapsed building...

“Hold on. Enemy attack from inside there,” Vandal warned as a number of scaly creatures leapt out from the building. They had slitted eyes like reptiles, mouths lined with teeth just as sharp as the sharks’, and hindlegs with claws

like knives. They might have only stood about six feet tall, but they were legitimate dinosaurs.

Fortunately, Detect Life had allowed Vandal to provide advance warning, and the ghoul warriors responded with ease to what their enemies had clearly hoped would be a surprise attack. The groaning dinosaurs were wiped out without issue.

“Oh, wow.” Vandal looked down at the corpses, impressed. He had been pretty taken with the wyverns, but these were dinosaurs, creatures that had been wiped out on Earth and even on Origin. Vandal had only ever seen fossils.

Vandal’s uncle on Earth had shot down any hope of him going on school trips to places like museums, meaning dinosaurs had become pretty romanticized for Vandal. One of the items on his bucket list had been to stand before a full-sized dino skeleton in a museum.

“Boy, can we keep going?” Zadilis prompted.

“King. Big lizard taste good?” one of the male ghouls asked.

Dear me. At least this doesn’t seem to be a type of dragon, Sam said.

For Zadilis and the others, these were just rank 3 or rank 4, lizard-like monsters that thankfully weren’t dragons, meaning his party didn’t understand Vandal’s fascination.

“. . . Once we’ve harvested what we can use, maybe I can make my own personal museum using their bones,” Vandal mused. He only noticed the confusion among his allies after he had already laid out his expansive dreams.

After the first attack by the raptors, Vandal and his party were attacked several more times. There were trash mobs like the ubiquitous goblins and

massive meat-eating dragonflies. There were more of the ents that Bugogan and his orcs had almost completely wiped out in their previous jungle demon barren, but they too couldn't put up much of a fight so long as one was careful of the flailing branches and vines.

The more powerful enemies were the rank 4 or higher monsters, including small groups of raptors, saber tigers over fifteen feet long, and horn bears, capable of ejecting long, hardened horns that grew all over their bodies. The resulting conclusion?

There are lots of monsters in this demon barren, Sam surmised.

You're right, Rita agreed. It's not a bad thing, but we can hardly make any progress.

There were so many monsters, and they were all so violent. Having the monsters come to them to attack made hunting pretty simple, and at this level of enemy strength, small groups that included rank 4 or higher leaders would be able to win their encounters, so long as they were careful. But the attacks were just so frequent that Vandal and his party had only advanced a half mile into the demon barren ruins. Considering the number of collapsed buildings and paths blocked by vegetation, this was not the pace that would sustain any kind of survey.

"Adventurers must never come here," Vandal said. "That's why there are so many monsters."

"That's probably part of it," Zadilis said, "but also, I don't think there's anything like us ghouls around here. That's why not only the dumb-looking needle wolves but also the cowardly goblins and smart-looking raptors are all attacking us. They don't know how strong we are."

Adventurers were good for culling the numbers of monsters, but they couldn't reach this particular demon barren because of the mountains hemming it in. That caused the number of monsters to continue to swell. Furthermore, there were no ghouls here, meaning the monsters had no idea of the strength of Zadilis and the others and saw them purely as "intruders."

If these suppositions were correct, it meant that once the ghouls moved in and started to hunt the monsters, the number of attacks would probably decrease. It might turn out to be the perfect place to live.

"The pace of attacks seems to be slowing down already," Zadilis commented, throwing a glance back at the row of undead zombies stumbling along behind Sam—the game that couldn't fit aboard the carriage.

Monsters were violent and would happily fight amongst themselves. However, they also wouldn't pick fights with those clearly more powerful than themselves, unless they were starving or cornered. In this case, the sight of a herd of monsters turned into undead really helped to make it clear who was superior. That said, the needle wolves and goblins continued their reckless attacks.

"We should stay away from the waterways," Vandal added.

"Indeed. They seem to detect the smell of blood very easily," Zadilis agreed. Taking care to avoid further notice from flying sharks, the party continued toward the undead-filled center of the demon barren ruins.

When they finally reached the center of the demon barren ruins, they were greeted with quite the sight. Everything was still in ruin, but it was almost artistic. A large castle loomed, with countless buildings clustered around it. It all

spoke to the former glory of this place.

Furthermore, as though explaining why Vandal hadn't sensed any life from the place, it was full of human monsters comprised of pure white bones.

Skeletons, Sam said. Big ones, too. They look like giantlings, although I've only heard talk of them. Maybe this was a country of giantlings.

All the skeletons were over six feet, with many reaching ten. They weren't just tall, but also had heavier, thicker bones than humans. The damage to the buildings had been worse on the perimeter, making it harder to notice, but the buildings and their fittings were all really large as well. Made from heavy stone, the buildings were around fifteen feet tall from floor to ceiling. One of the ghoul warriors picked up what looked like some kind of basket, and then Vandal realized it was actually a broken cup.

If Kachia the former adventurer had been present, she might have explained how there had once been a giantling country here. The Milg Shield Kingdom had invaded and wiped it out on orders from the Amidd Empire about 200 years ago.

Giantlings. The first new race created by the Goddess Vida after the war with the Demon King.

From among the brethren of the Titan God Zeno, who fell in the conflict with his heart crushed, the Sun Giant Talos had retained his mental fortitude and goodwill even as the others fell to servicing the evil gods. He was the one who had mated with the goddess to create the giantling race. A race of warriors, too, with hale and hearty bodies. A giantling with a shield was said to be as sturdy as any castle wall, apart from those walls they would themselves crush when on the attack.

“I guess it’s my first time seeing a real one,” Vandal said. He had been born in the Milg Shield Kingdom, under the control of the Amidd Empire with its discrimination against Vida’s new races, and he had never even been into town on his own—of course he had never seen a giantling before.

He wasn’t the only one. There were few adventurers in the Amidd Empire from among the new races, meaning neither Sam—footman for a noble in life—nor Zadilis and the ghouls had seen one either.

“. . . Not real, just bones, king,” one of the ghouls commented. For some, the fact they were just bones suggested that this didn’t count as a real giantling sighting.

“There are some that aren’t bones,” Vandal said, a little defensively, pointing farther inside at some giantling zombies. Maybe his allies weren’t going to accept the distinction, but he felt like he had to point it out.

The bigger issue was whether they should be having this kind of conversation when faced with a couple of hundred undead crowded around them. But the result was the same as they had experienced previously in the dungeon. That is, no problem at all.

Many of the undead were equipped with rusty swords, axes, and pitted spears, but they didn’t raise any of them to attack. Instead, they opened a path for Vandal and then took a knee and bowed their heads. They reacted to Zadilis and the ghouls in the same way, displaying no intent to attack at all.

“It’s true. Even untamed undead don’t attack you,” Zadilis said. “Simply not attacking is one thing, but I’m amazed to see them leaving themselves so exposed.”

“I was pretty surprised the first time myself,” Vandal agreed. He had prepared

some magic, thinking perhaps they might attack the non-undead among his allies, but there was clearly no need. Just to be sure, he used a non-attribute magic, Appraisal, to check them out.

Skeleton Warrior (Giantling) Rank 3

An undead monster created from the corpse of a dead giantling warrior. It hates all living things, and in particular the one who killed it.

Appraisal ended up providing more information than he expected. His non-attribute magic was level 1, and when he used Appraisal on a raptor corpse all he had seen was “Corpse of a dinosaur-like monster.”

He used Appraisal on more of the Skeleton Soldiers and Skeletons who were kneeling around him, and managed to pick up their names, ranks, and simple descriptions. But when he tried using Appraisal on a random plant, all he got back was “Plant. A plant.” So, it seemed like for undead only could Vandal’s Appraisal provide information beyond the skill level and knowledge of the user.

Well, young master. What next? Sam asked.

“Good question. It seems they’re willing to lend us an ear, so let’s see if they have an undead among them who acts as leader, and then we can discuss moving in,” Vandal said.

Based on the information obtained from Appraisal, these weren’t like Vandal’s own bone creations. Rather, they had been created using the spirit from their original body. Maybe that meant they would be open to discussion, although no one would normally consider negotiating with undead. That said, Zadilis and the other ghouls were accustomed to undead like Sam, capable of

talking and expressing themselves, and so none of them questioned Vandal's decision. And as it turned out, Vandal's assumption was correct.

Among the rooms, there was a temple-like building that remained comparatively whole. From there, a monster emerged that clearly looked different from the other undead.

Yes . . . Aah . . .

The undead looked like a mummy, comprised of bones with flesh stuck onto them, and dressed in a tattered yellow outfit that looked like some kind of religious garment. It walked directly toward Vandal. It continued to make noises, perhaps intrigued, perhaps otherwise. The ghouls handled their weapons uneasily, watching the approach of this ten-foot-plus undead. Saria and Rita also looked confused—or rather, acted confused.

But the undead didn't seem to notice any of them, walking straight to Vandal and collapsing down onto one knee before it spoke.

"O, Oracle Child," the undead intoned. "You are most welcome, finally here in Talosheim, capital of the sun. Please, save us! Save those who only wait here to return to dust!"

Zadilis and the others looked confused by these words, while Vandal continued to look at the newcomer in silence. He was also expressionless, as his eyes always looked dead. But inside, Vandal was actually pretty worried. This was starting to feel like he was about to end up with another alias.

Death Attribute Allure level increased!



“O, Oracle Child! You are most welcome, finally here in Talosheim, capital of the sun. Please, save us! Save those who only wait here to return to dust!”

Having been approached in this way by the mummy undead, Vandal couldn't stop himself from momentarily spacing out. It was Dalshia addressing him that snapped him back to himself.

Vandal, hey, are you okay?

“Huh! Ah, yes, I'm fine,” Vandal assured her. “Just a little surprised. Can you tell me more about . . . all of this, ah . . .”

“Of course, Child. I am Nuaza the Lich,” the undead replied.

A lich was a monster created when someone with magical abilities retained their knowledge and skills after death, becoming a powerful undead.

“The dilapidated glory you see before you is the once glittering Capital of the Sun, the giantling's fortress city of Talosheim. The secrets of the lost Hero Zakkato and the blessings of the Goddess Vida brought us great prosperity, but the sudden invasion and destruction wrought by the Milg Shield Kingdom 200 years ago reduced us to the demon barren you now see before you. Please, save us! Save us who only wait here to return—”

“I'm sorry, but maybe you could provide a little more detail?” Vandal interrupted. Patience was definitely required when talking to undead, but sometimes it was also necessary to cut them off and redirect the conversation.

Based on Nuaza's ensuing explanation, this was a city created by the surviving titans from the battle between the Goddess Vida and Alda, more than 100,000 years ago. It was located amid the mountains, a rare location that wasn't demon barrens at the time. While the location didn't get much sunlight, the

secret techniques and knowledge left by the Hero Zakkato had provided them with access to the rich blessings of the sun. The giantlings had used their impressive physicality to shape the land, cultivate it, and cultivate lush fields. They had taken the name of their own progenitor in the Capital of the Sun, Talosheim, and lived their lives in worship of the Goddess Vida and the Hero Zakkato. They had honed their bodies, mastered the martial arts, and cleared dungeons to obtain any materials that they lacked access to, building a sturdy white fortress. Salt, metals, meat, everything else that they needed, they obtained from fighting monsters.

Eventually, they discovered an ancient tunnel created in the mountains to the east. After laying a road to the eastern Olbaum Electorate Kingdom, they began to trade with the people there. Their prizes from the dungeons sold for a pretty price in Olbaum, which only brought further prosperity to Talosheim.

That prosperity, however, was trampled by the sudden arrival of military forces from the Milg Shield Kingdom.

“Without any warning, hostile forces suddenly swept over the mountains and into Talosheim,” Nuaza continued. As it turned out, approximately 200 years ago the Milg Shield Kingdom was ordered by the Amidd Empire, in the name of Divine Alda, to wipe out the kingdom of the giantlings. Sam and his daughters had served a noble in the Milg Shield Kingdom during life, and Kachia was a former adventurer, so they added context to this explanation back at the camp.

There were two primary reasons for the invasion. The first was simply the growing strength of the Milg Shield Kingdom. In order to maintain Milg’s subordinate position, the Amidd Empire sought to reduce their strength. The second was a religious one: a desire to realize a specific intention of the hero Bellwood.

Vandal learned a new piece of information from among all this. Bellwood was representative of the three heroes who fought on the side of the God of Law and Life Alda. He believed that while the technology and knowledge the heroes had brought here from other worlds would provide good things in the short term, they would steal away the opportunities for these people to advance under their own auspices and lead to nothing but disaster in the long run. For that reason, he had clashed with the Hero Zakkato numerous times even before he was resurrected as undead by the Goddess Vida, due to Zakkato's attempts to spread culture and progress through activities such as locating the progenitor species to rice in Ramda and magically altering it to accelerate agricultural production. During the fighting between Alda and Vida, Bellwood and his followers had taken the opportunity to destroy as much of the imported technology and culture that Zakkato had created.

Those sentiments remained in the Amidd Empire, which claimed to be founded by the descendants of Bellwood, and the religion of Divine Alda that considered him a saint, simply transforming into national policy and religious dogma. Of course, the heroes and the gods who had summoned them were the only ones who could really say whether the knowledge and technology had come from another world or was simply the result of natural development here. The standards for determining whether anything was a relic of Zakkato were quite vague.

As a sidenote, the Amidd Empire used this backstory as justification for their attack on the rice-producing Olbaum Electorate Kingdom.

The upshot of all this political and religious posturing was that a force from the Milg Shield Kingdom, commanded by soldiers from the Amidd Empire, made the brutal effort to find a safe route through the mountains and swept into Talosheim in the thousands. Of course, it goes without saying that the

Amidd Empire was also after Talosheim's wealth.

Meanwhile, the Milg Shield Kingdom soldiers didn't even see the giantlings as humans. They were an inferior race, created by a fallen goddess. Surely they were perpetrating reckless pillaging and murder.

Talosheim lost a number of smaller settlements up until that point, but the people of the city were brave and powerful fighters against more than just monsters. They had no experience with large-scale conflict against humans, but the swords that they swung would easily disembowel Milg Shield Kingdom soldiers, and the shields they thrust in front of the charging knights shattered their frail lances before smashing their meat and bones.

Most importantly, Talosheim also had a number of their own heroes. There was Sword King Borkz, who had defeated every monster he had ever encountered with his mighty sword, Healing Saint Geena, the young head of the temple to Vida who was skilled in life attribute magic, Hungry Wolf Ogvan, who preferred his own company and had solo-cleared all of the dungeons in Talosheim, Double Halberd Barigen, who created a tornado across the battlefield by swirling his mighty weapons, and Tiny Genius Zandia, the young second princess of the realm who had an affinity for every magic attribute, despite the fact that giantlings didn't generally favor magic. All the names sounded a lot like ghoulish ones, which made Vandal wonder if this was because they were another of Vida's new races, but he decided not to interrupt the conversation with that observation.

The deeds of these heroes helped Talosheim halt the advance of the Milg Shield Kingdom, but the enemies had heroes of their own. One of them, a hero from the Milg Shield Kingdom named Divine Ice Spear Mikhail, joined as a reinforcement. His promotion to an S-rank adventurer had already been

confirmed, and his participation tipped the scales back in the favor of the Milg Shield Kingdom.

“Mikhail was equipped with a legendary magic item, the Frozen Spear Ice Age,” Nuaza said. “A prized treasure of the Milg Shield Kingdom, it was said to have been created especially for the hero by a god of ice serving Pelia, goddess of water and knowledge. Mikhail made short work of the other warriors fighting alongside our own heroes. The castle walls were finally breached, and the barbarians of the Milg Shield Kingdom army poured into the city.”

All that Talosheim could do was to send the children, elderly, their first princess, and some guards through the tunnel to their trade partner, the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom.

“I was still a priest in training, but I fought to the end as a clergyman of the Goddess Vida,” Nuaza said. “Yet I was unable to strike a blow against the hated Mikhail or protect our own heroic Geena or Zandia. I simply died.”

Even after Nuaza’s death, the destruction and pillaging by the Milg Shield Kingdom continued unabated. Mikhail eventually attempted to destroy even the secret treasure of the Goddess Vida, which was concealed deep beneath the castle of Talosheim. However, the subterranean treasure was protected by a dragon golem created and placed there by the Goddess Vida herself, even though the S-rank-equivalent Mikhail was unable to destroy the treasure.

Indeed, while they destroyed the right arm and wing, chopped off half the tail, and crushed the head of the dragon golem, the dragon wiped out all of his companions and dealt Mikhail terrible wounds. He managed to use his lance to briefly freeze the still-moving golem and took that moment to escape.

Therefore, although the forces of the Milg Shield Kingdom were victorious, the fierce resistance offered by the giantlings had eroded their forces and their

hero was at death's door. They were unable to hold onto Talosheim and were forced to retreat. This was mainly because, though they had defeated the giants of Talosheim, the smell of blood continued to attract tireless waves of monsters from the surrounding demon barrens.

Nuaza didn't know what had happened in the "victorious" Milg Shield Kingdom and Amidd Empire after that, but as it turned out they weren't in any position to celebrate. Attempts to heal Mikhail failed, and he died a few days after returning home. Many of the other elite Milg Shield Kingdom fighters had been slain, while many of the survivors were rendered unable to fight. Compared to the expense and losses incurred by the campaign, the first princess had taken all of the greatest treasures and assets with her when she fled Talosheim, meaning the plunder for the Milg Shield Kingdom was far less than originally estimated.

Furthermore, the first princess's escape to the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom had provided them with information on the invasion. Olbaum raised forces to punish the perpetrators, including the holy Amidd Empire that was pulling their strings. Milg had already struggled in the fighting with Talosheim and sending in reinforcements had left their borders exposed. Plenty of forts fell during this fresh fighting, and Olbaum occupied numerous towns. In the end, the country with "shield" in its name needed to be protected by a panicked dispatch of forces from the Amidd Empire.

Up until that point, the Amidd Empire had gradually been chipping pieces away from the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom, but these defeats resulted in the immediate loss of almost all of those gains. The fighting in the 200 years since had been about reclaiming that lost territory—something they had finally achieved during the most recent battles.

On top of that, the adventurers from Talosheim had been keeping the monsters in the Boundary Mountains under control. The loss of the city caused the numbers of monsters to swell, while the unchecked dungeons were left to overflow. This caused the demon barrens to spread, not only closing the safe route that the Milg Shield Kingdom had found into Talosheim, but completely cutting off any route from the mountains. In the end, the invasion of Talosheim was a historic failure for the Amidd Empire, and for the Milg Shield Kingdom in particular.

When Nuaza learned this from Sam and Kachia's information, his mummified face broke into a smile.

"Suck it!" he cackled. He sounded so overjoyed, Vandal thought for a moment that he might cross over. Those were the people who had wiped him and his entire nation out. One could hardly blame him for his hatred.

Vandal couldn't help but shake his head at the pathetic antics of the Amidd Empire and the Milg Shield Kingdom. Talosheim had a tunnel that could safely pass through the eastern mountains, after all. Rather than simply trying to take the city by force, they should have first worked to drive a wedge between Talosheim and the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom. Even if they couldn't turn Talosheim against them, they could have still formed a mutual agreement not to attack each other, and then used the tunnel to raid the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom. They could have purchased supplies, including food, from Talosheim to maintain their supply lines, holding the advantage in battle.

But instead, they had given priority to their state and religious posturing, destroying more of the Milg Shield Kingdom's strength than expected and getting hammered by a painful counterattack. Vandal had never even played those military simulation games and yet he could envisage this plan. The leaders

of these nations had to be complete morons. Vandal wasn't one to agree with Rodocolte—never—but this was certainly an empire in a pretty backward world.

“Yup, the Milg Shield Kingdom and Amidd Empire are pure trash. I wish they would just die out completely,” Vandal said.

“Boy, Sam and his girls are humans from the Milg Shield Kingdom,” Zadilis admonished him.

Young master, there are still people like Kachia among those from the Milg Shield Kingdom. I think wishing to wipe them all out is maybe a little much, Sam chimed in.

That's right. The Milg Shield Kingdom might have chased us out of that demon barren, but they aren't all bad people, Rita added.

We were born in the Milg Shield Kingdom. We stand ready to mow down anyone you command us to, young master, even our former countrymen, Sam continued. *But I would ask you to think carefully before you give that order.*

“Child, the Milg Shield Kingdom and Amidd Empire that I despise are those from 200 years ago,” Nuaza said. “For us titans, that would be the generation of our parents and grandparents—for humans, even further back. The goddess tells us not to turn our hatred onto the children of those who wrong us.”

That's right, Vandal, his mother added. *Don't forget the kindness, the mercy you showed in Evbejia. If you can hold onto that kindness, that's all I need.*

Everyone noticed the hatred lurking deep in Vandal's heart, which led to him getting mobbed from all sides. *I don't understand,* he thought. *Well, I suppose I can.* Vandal recognized that what everyone was saying was correct.

“Okay, I'll try to keep it under control,” Vandal said. “Next . . . what's this

‘Oracle Child’ stuff about?” He somehow snapped the rusty lid back over his well of hatred and prompted Nuaza in another direction.

The mummy started to talk about what happened to them after the war. The anger at being killed and the pain of not being buried turned more than half of the deceased giantlings into undead within less than a month. They proceeded to encounter the soldiers of the Milg Shield Kingdom who had also turned into undead, and even though both sides were now dead, they started trying to kill each other all over again. This time, the Talosheim forces were victorious. Even after turning into undead, however, they felt strongly that they needed to protect their homeland, and so they didn’t go so far as risking a lengthy expedition to the Milg Shield Kingdom for any further revenge.

They had been concerned about whether the first princess had made it safely to the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom, and so some of them had gone to check the tunnel, only to find that the entrance had collapsed. The plan had always been to bring down the opening after clearing the tunnel, in order to prevent any Milg Shield Kingdom forces from giving pursuit. If the opening was blocked, that meant the princess and her retinue had probably escaped. They had no idea what further tribulations the escaped giantlings would have faced in the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom. They had been left to place their trust in one Duke Heartner, who had been directly involved in trading with the friendly nation.

Now they were all undead. They attempted to retain their mental faculties but had no idea how or how long they would last. If they went after the princess as undead, they would probably only make things more difficult for her. That was what most of them came to believe. Some of the giantlings did still leave, attempting to cross the mountains, and never came back. Among those who chose to remain, some lost their purpose and faded away. Nuaza and the others stayed in Talosheim, now nothing more than a place of the dead,

and spent their days protecting the ruins.

“We were on the slow road to our inevitable extinction,” Nuaza said. There were multiple demon barrens around Talosheim, and dungeons that their adventurers had ventured into almost daily in order to acquire materials. Nuaza and the other undead simply gathered in the center of the ruins, however—the castle and its immediate environs. They didn’t attempt to leave the city and didn’t bother with the dungeons. That caused the monsters to swell in numbers, with the polluted magical power from these monsters causing the demon barrens to spread over the next 200 years, even extending into the city itself.

If a monster other than a giantling undead reached the center of Talosheim, Nuaza and the others would defeat it. They were skilled, with a considerably high rank as monsters. They had the powerful bodies of giantling warriors, possessed by the spirits of those who had inhabited those same bodies during life, and even retained some of their memories and personalities from when they were alive. For them, a couple of hundred monsters overflowing from demon barrens or dungeons that they had already used for hunting while alive were little more than a way to pass the time.

Perhaps there was some mental barrier, however, because none of them made any serious attempts to purify the demon barrens that were encroaching on their ruins. As they were themselves monsters, they would have been unable to do a good job of it even if they tried. So as the external demon barrens worked their way inward, the monsters started to multiply at a rate that far outstripped normal animals. The more monsters there were, the more they had to fight to survive, which in turn generated more powerful survivors. On the other hand, the Talosheim undead could only decrease in numbers.

In general, groups of undead would bolster their numbers with the corpses of adventurers or monsters that they defeated. But no adventurers came here, and the monsters that turned into undead seemed not to recognize the giantlings as their brethren—likely because so many of the humanoids retained personalities from before they died. So the giantlings defeated any monsters that did turn into undead as soon as they started moving again.

Eventually, thousands of powerful monsters were going to swarm down from the surrounding demon barrens, washing over Nuaza and the other Talosheim undead, finally returning them to dust.

“We believed that was what had to happen,” Nuaza said. “As time passed, our numbers dwindled. There’s no reason for undead to exist who have no attachment to this world, or who no longer hold a grudge. We spent our days defending the grave of our nation, praying for the safety of the princess and the others who escaped, and simply waiting for our end to come. That was when the Sun Goddess bestowed her prophecy upon us.”

This took place about fifty years after the fighting, time that Nuaza had spent restoring the goddess statue that the Milg Shield Kingdom soldiers had destroyed. The prophecy was pretty on the nose: “A white child shall come from the west, our forgotten children in tow. That child shall bring thee glory and prosperity once again.”

Hearing this voice, ringing with benevolence, Nuaza knew that it must be a prophecy from the goddess. In the same moment, he recalled a legend passed down by his own ancestors. The originator of the vampires, born to Goddess Vida and the great Hero Zakkato, had made his own prophecy upon being defeated by the hero Bellwood: “Even if I am defeated, I shall return! I shall stand with my brothers and defeat the disciples of your arrogant god!”

These two prophecies clicked in Nuaza's mind. The white child the goddess spoke of—he had to be the legendary progenitor of the vampires.

Now, more than 100 years later, Nuaza finally met such a white child, surrounded by a divine aura (the effect of Death Attribute Allure), and bringing with him a bunch of ghouls, those members of one of Vida's new races who were seen completely as monsters by human society.

“Ah, Child, you are the white one spoken of in the prophecy,” said Nuaza. “The second coming of the son of the goddess and the hero. Please, stand with us and bring us glory and prosperity once more—”

“Hold on, hold on. Oracle, prophecy, I think you are getting mixed up here,” Vandal said, hurriedly attempting to put this particular horse back in the barn. Being called “Oracle Child” was bad enough, but with this other prophecy getting into the mix, things were heading in a dangerous direction. He was about to be hoisted up as the head of the anti-Alda movement.

Vandal didn't have any love for Divine Alda or her followers and saw them as his enemies, but he also didn't feel confident enough to fight their high priest and his fanatical goons. It didn't matter how composed and logical undead might appear; they acted only on their base desires. He didn't need to get them worked up and end up leading an assault on the Milg Shield Kingdom. The words from the goddess were pretty on the nose, he had to admit, but the second prophecy was far vaguer.

The first prophecy could just be some delusion that Nuaza had experienced along with turning into undead, but the description fitted him perfectly. He wasn't planning on leading anyone to glory and prosperity, but what he had planned may actually result in that for Nuaza and his people. Vandal wouldn't have believed anything of the sort if he was still back on Earth, but now he

knew that gods actually existed. There were plenty of them scattered across the lore of Ramda, and it was hardly improbable that they would pass messages to their followers.

Now, though, the message was somehow connected to a prophecy left by the progenitor vampire. These two things didn't seem related at all, at least not to Vandal.

"Hmmm. Vandal is white, indeed, and we ghouls are a race rooted in the Goddess Vida, so that foretelling seems correct," Zadilis said. "The prophecy about being the reborn progenitor, however, doesn't convince me."

But there was no talking Nuaza down. "That matters not," he said. "We have been unable to return to the dust from which we came, yet unable to spark fresh hatred in our souls, left to simply exist in this gray space. Your arrival, Child, has been the only thing we have had to cling to."

Vandal wasn't completely unhappy to have someone he had never even met before place such expectations on him, but it was shaping up to be a nuisance. He didn't exactly have a map that was going to lead them into glory and prosperity—"No problem, mate, straight ahead, second left." That said, it would definitely suit his purposes if doing what he came here to do anyway gave Nuaza and the others a favorable impression.

"In that case, we have about 600 with us, including many more ghouls. Would you mind if we all moved into Talosheim?" Vandal asked.

"Oh!" Nuaza exclaimed. "You would move into our city, Child? There are no living people here, nothing but ruins! None will object, right, everyone?"

The other giantling undead, who had remained kneeling in silence until this point, all let out rumbling sounds of agreement at Nuaza's question.

“We welcome the Child and his party! Raaah!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaah!”

“Kill them! Kill them! Anyone who opposes, kill them!”

“Kill everything!”

The ruins had been quiet as the grave a moment before, and now they were filled with shouts of happiness and murder. The giantling undead swung their weapons around, looking like they were ready to head off into battle at once. They were so transformed, Vandal almost wanted to ask if they could transform back, but once undead got worked up it was notoriously hard to talk them down. This information wasn't widely known, as the majority of undead remained in an excited state for the entirety of their existence.

“Listen, boy. Some of them seem to be getting a little—overly excited?” Zadilis cautioned.

“It's fine,” Vandal assured her. “They're talking about everyone who opposes us moving in, that's all.”

I agree with that interpretation, but also understand that sometimes people get carried away, and mistakes happen, Sam chimed in.

You certainly speak from experience, Dad, Rita quipped.

“Then we should get started. Everyone willing to help, come along with me,” Vandal said.

The result was a few hundred giantling undead charging across the gap between the center of Talosheim and the temporary camp where the other ghouls waited with such force as though to iron the terrain flat. They manhandled any needle wolves or raptors that attacked and smashed down any trees in the way, quickly creating a safe passage over the entire mile and a half

to the gates of the former fortress nation. Vandal doubted there was even a mouse left in their wake.

He took a moment to debate whether he was incredible for spurring them into such action, or they were incredible for acting so decisively on such scant hope. It didn't take him long to work it out.

“Yeah, it's the second one.”

With a safe road now carved from the madness, Vandal began the work of moving into the center of Talosheim. The other ghouls were still stunned at him showing up with a seemingly bloodthirsty bunch of fresh undead.

They had chosen the center of the city rather than the outskirts because of the castle, temple, city office, and other sturdy buildings in the area, many of which were still partially intact. The violence of the fighting 200 years ago had damaged them, but the Milg Shield Kingdom had wanted to destroy the Vida Temple and the treasures beneath the castle. The other, overly sturdy stone buildings hadn't been worth the effort to demolish. Furthermore, the undead had defended the central area, preventing monsters from taking up residence for the entire 200 years since the fall of the city. After some cleaning, Vandal's group would be able to use the buildings.

That said, objects made to giantling specifications were too big for the ghouls. All the furnishings not made from stone had long since rotted away and anything that was left was too large. They were going to need to make plenty of modifications and new furniture.

At least they had plenty of materials. They started by lining up the trees from the demon barrens that the giantling undead had chopped down.

“Whither. Rise. Form lumber. Leave,” Vandal commanded. He used Whither death attribute magic to remove the moisture from the wood, suitably drying it out. Then he used Golem Creation to turn them into wood golems, made the wood into lumber, and then had the spirits leave the wood again.

He used this method to quickly turn the trees from the demon barrens into processed lumber. The ghouls then started partitioning off rooms and making furniture. They had lived a primitive life in the demon barrens already, meaning they didn’t have any extravagant tastes. The preparations only took a few days.

Vandal also used Golem Creation to fix the cracks and collapsed portions of the buildings. Seeing him in action, the giantlings who had been craftsmen in life shouted things like, “We can’t let him make us look bad!” and “Don’t let the Child do all the work!” Then they threw down their weapons and started to help out. It was an unexpected but happy accident.

In terms of issues, Nuaza had been right when he said that he was only a priest in training back when he was alive. Among the giantling undead he was little more than a representative of the temple, with all the higher-ranking priests either failing to become undead or having already passed on. That meant Nuaza wasn’t in any position to make decisions for the giantlings.

While some undead therefore helped out with the move, others simply remained inside the buildings. Even one of the heroes of Talosheim, Sword King Borkz himself, was still inside the castle, protecting it. Now that was someone—somebody—some dead body that Vandal would have loved to recruit.

“If I can position him as the leader of the undead, there should be fewer issues between the races after I’ve moved on to the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom,” Vandal mused.

They had secured plenty of living space, meaning there was no need to have

Borkz give up the castle, but Vandal still asked Nuaza to make the introductions and headed off to meet with Borkz. Zadilis, Saria, and the others, who for some reason decided not to tag along, watched him with their heads tilted.

Enhance Brethren increased to Level 5!

Carpentry increased to Level 2!

Cooking skill acquired!



While Vandal went with Nuaza into the castle to scout things out with Sword King Borkz, the key members of Vandal's group who knew him the best, including Zadilis and Vigaro and everyone apart from Sam, gathered in a single room.

"Master Sam is unable to join us, due to not being able to leave the carriage, but everyone else is here," Zadilis said.

"What have you gathered us for, Zadilis?" Talea asked, hiding her mouth elegantly behind a fan carved from ent wood.

"You were not invited," Basdia replied hotly, her eyes narrowing.

Talea gave a small chuckle in response. "When I heard you were planning something special for Lord Van, I simply had to be in attendance," she said.

"Hmmm. I don't recall specifically stating it like that, but very well." Zadilis had been hoping to keep this to those who knew Vandal's full history—about his past lives, and the other hundred who would eventually be born here. He

shared a lot about himself with Talea, however. Zadilis didn't see a problem so long as she tread carefully around certain issues. She decided to proceed with the meeting. "The reason I have gathered you all is to explain why the boy needs to rest and obtain your help in making him do so."

Her opening remarks already prompted some confusion.

Rest, you say? The young master sleeps soundly every night.

Like a log, one might say.

Saria and Rita were in attendance, in place of their father. They were also correct—Vandal did sleep well. Calmly, peacefully, without even rolling over. Zadilis had checked his pulse more than a few times, worried he might actually be dead.

"They right, Zadilis. Vandal never tired. If tired, he say rest," Vigaro said with his typically toothy eloquence.

"I agree. We made sauce and preserved food together, and he was exactly like normal," Basdia agreed.

They were correct. Vandal didn't look tired, didn't act tired, didn't have a tired expression on his face. He would never say that he was tired or that he wanted to take a break. Sometimes he might give a sigh, but that was directed more at the failure of reality to cooperate with his ideals, and his sighs were so slight that few rarely even noticed them.

You all take such good care of him, Dalshia said. He does push himself hard, but I don't think he's overdoing it. Vandal's mother was awake at that moment and taking part via interpretation through Saria.

Zadilis felt the trust that Dalshia had in them all, even though her words came secondhand, but she shook her head.

“My apologies for betraying your trust, but we are pushing him too hard,” Zadilis said. “I gave his shoulders a rub the other day, just playfully—and they were tense. Very tense. He said it was heavenly and almost fell asleep on the spot.”

“I wondered what you were going to come out with, but really? Boasting about your massage talents? A good shoulder rub will get anyone relaxed, trust me,” Talea said.

“The elderly should think for five seconds before opening their mouths. Remember! The boy is only on the cusp of turning three,” Zadilis said.

The remark made everyone freeze. A child who enjoyed a shoulder massage—in other words, a child with stiff shoulders. Something no child would normally suffer from.

“And think! How much does the boy pack into each day? I’ve personally seen him practicing alchemy for at least four hours a day.” Crushing materials with a mortar, mixing them together, and adding some magical power—four hours a day of that.

“He makes walnut and herb sauces, and cookies from acorns and other fruit and nuts,” Basdia added. “When we ran out of salt, he was worried about what to use instead. He was using mill and mortar golems, of course, so I don’t think it took too much time or effort, but still . . .” That was more time he spent, chatting with the women while working.

“He took care of us while we were on the move, too,” Talea said. “He used Lemures and bug undead to keep watch, while making paths for the wagons and then turning them back. Now he’s turning trees into lumber and repairing damage to buildings.”

He's also practicing non-attribute magic late into the night, including using Telekinesis to perform delicate movements and practice his Magic Control, Saria said.

What? The young master also practices death attribute magic from first thing in the morning! Rita exclaimed.

So when does he sleep?! Dalshia exclaimed.

“Now you see the issue. The boy has the Resist Maladies skill, meaning he can hold off exhaustion and a lack of sleep. He's got that right up to the Limit Break,” Zadilis said.

With the skills Vandal had, he could resist exhaustion even with his infant body, so he didn't realize how hard he was pushing. His resistance skills meant he could still move around per normal, which made him think that he still had more in the tank. That meant he could resist anything other than the sleep he absolutely required for his development, and gradually sleep less and less, believing it was enough. But these resistance skills ultimately offered nothing more than that—resistance. They didn't stop him from becoming exhausted and didn't help him recover. Which meant the exhaustion just piled up.

“Now that you mention it . . . Vandal rarely expresses any kind of emotion, does he? His tone, his gestures, his general atmosphere, there are some hints, but not that much . . .” Basdia said.

Vandal rarely allowed anyone to see all that exhaustion. His face was already as white as white could be. It went beyond the ideal of flawless skin, a kind of death's-door white as though he had been covered in wax. There was therefore no way to tell his physical condition from his face.

Dalshia, Sam, Saria, and Rita hadn't noticed Vandal's exhaustion because they

were undead, freed from fleshly bodies, and so they didn't know the feeling themselves. It had only been three years since Sam and his family became undead, and yet they had already completely forgotten the sensation of physical exhaustion. Dalshia spent more than half the day sleeping in her bone. It was impossible for her to track how long Vandal was spending active.

"Huh. Why Vandal not rest? Busy during journey, true, but not last few days. Even on journey, if ask, we let him rest," Vigaro snarled.

As Vigaro said, Vandal could take a break if he asked for one. All he needed to do was ask, and everyone would accommodate him. He had truly become the king of the ghouls, after all, sitting in the top spot of their community. Everyone accepted Vandal was the ghoul king now, including the primary ghoul leaders such as Vigaro, Zadilis, Talea, and Basdia.

They wouldn't have been able to continue through the mountains without Vandal making them a road, but if they had chosen a spot with fewer monster attacks then they could have taken a day of rest. No one would have complained. Without Vandal, the ghouls would never have made it across the mountains in the first place.

Indeed, without Vandal, the women they had rescued from Bugogan would still be captive, and the Ghoul Grotto and its ghouls would have been wiped out by an orc attack. None of them would, or even could, begrudge Vandal a break.

And yet Vandal never once asked for one.

"That's true. Why do you think that is?" Zadilis prompted. She wasn't sure she could explain this herself. This was because the ghouls were naturally a race with a penchant for slacking off. They needed to say a lot of "don't stop, keep training, get to work" and not much "let's take a break." The ghouls would take breaks without being told to and were happy to let people know how tired they

were. That was proof of their monster side shining through.

Hmmm, Saria said. Vandal did keep up with his naps for a while after Dad became the carriage.

It has to be his resistance skills, Dalshia finally concluded. I think someone told me once that races who are born with such skills tend to not be very aware of the dangers of the maladies they suppress.

Dalshia was a dark elf, meaning she had been born with the skill Resist Magic. It made it harder for her to take damage from attack magic, harder for magical maladies to affect her, and easier for her to recover from them. This could lead to issues with dark elves placing too much trust in their Resist Magic and getting severely burned or wanting to take an enemy alive in battle but reducing them to meaty chunks due to overestimating the amount of magic required to incapacitate them. All dark elf children were instructed when small about what the resistance skill provided them.

But Vandal had never had such instruction. His Resist Maladies was allowing him to keep going, and he was probably just a little surprised at how he didn't feel all that tired.

That's why he doesn't think to take a break, Dalshia said. He might also think we are still in a state of emergency, or that excessive measures are required. A lot has happened since I died . . .

Survival had been the top priority immediately after she passed away, and then he worked on getting his revenge. They had ended up with the ghouls, but rather than acquiring the skills he had been after and leaving the demon barrens behind, he had remained with them to keep training. Then they had attacked the Noble Orc, crossed the mountains, and now they were moving into Talosheim. It really was a series of emergencies. Vandal did a lot of these things

without directly moving his body, meaning he might not have felt like he was working that hard. However, there was one thing that everyone in the room did know: using magical power wore you out.

“You have made it clear that Lord Van is exhausted. In that case, shouldn’t we just tell him to take a break?” Talea said.

Zadilis’s message that Vandal needed rest had been received. But they didn’t see how things weren’t so simple.

In reply, Zadilis shook her head at Talea’s comment. “I’ve tried that myself, numerous times. He doesn’t really pay any attention,” Zadilis said.

The last time she tried to get him to take a break, he had pushed back, saying he could keep going, but eventually acquiesced and stopped training. Even when lying down, however, he continued his death attribute magic training. When he took a walk to relax, he would start repairing buildings, even if they didn’t need it. When he saw anything that he could do, he did it. One time, Zadilis thought he was playing with the black goblins and anubi, but he turned out to be teaching them lessons. He even provided care for the Living Dead. He was getting almost no rest at all. There was also the issue with the Skeleton, the one undead who had reached level 100 but hadn’t ranked up, so he was also spending time trying to resolve that.

“That reminds me,” Basdia said. “When Van hits three years old, he asked me to teach him Brawling Proficiency. He said something about being able to become a master if you start learning when you’re three.”

“What?!” Vigaro exclaimed. “Not me? Basdia?!”

It’s the difference in the length of your arms, Saria said. I doubt Vandal could learn the same techniques as you. Male and female ghouls use different types of

Brawling Proficiency. You taught me that, Vigaro.

“Vigaro, enough yapping,” Zadilis said. “If Basdia can teach her, she might also be able to get him to take a break. That’s the issue, anyway. We have to find a way to get Vandal to take a break. I’ve spent so long trying to work out how to motivate our own young, it’s a change of pace to try and get someone to rest.”

And so Zadilis and the others continued to discuss ways to get Vandal to take a break while he was out at the castle.



Guided by Nuaza, Vandal struggled through the crumbling castle gate.

“These steps weren’t made with babies in mind,” Vandal muttered.

The average height of a male giantling was nearly nine feet and the average for a female over eight, meaning the architecture wasn’t especially pleasant for Vandal to traverse. Climbing the stairs required considerable athleticism.

“My apologies. As you can see, the stairs intended for use by other races are covered with rubble,” Nuaza said. He proceeded to scoop Vandal up with one skin-and-bone arm. Even though he had become a lich—specifically, a Lesser Lich—he still appeared to retain the Brute Strength skill that he had possessed in life.

“I put it off because we haven’t been using it,” Vandal said, looking around, “but we should be fixing up the castle as quickly as possible.”

Dalshia and the others would have probably immediately tried to shut down such an idea, but Nuaza simply said, “If it suits your schedule, Child, we would be agreeable. Having the castle restored would make us most happy, but you

have no military or ministers to staff it. It also surely isn't going to fall down for at least another few hundred years."

For Nuaza and the other Talosheim undead, the castle was little more than a massive grave marker. They would be happy to see it fixed up, but they didn't desire it so badly that they wanted to cut into Vandal's busy schedule.

It had been 200 years since the terrible fighting here, and yet the castle was still standing firm. It had crumbled a little in some places, but this was what construction with dungeon stone got you. Nuaza was right—it would surely last for hundreds of years.

"I'll get to it when I have a little more time, then," Vandal said. "So where can I find Borkz?"

"He should be in front of the door leading to the audience chamber. The hidden stairs that lead underground are there," Nuaza explained. "He hasn't moved from there for 200 years."

Before heading out on this scouting session, Vandal had spent a little time talking with Nuaza and the other giantling undead about Sword King Borkz. He was the only one of the Talosheim heroes who had turned into undead and was the strongest of the remaining giantlings. The others described him as benevolent, good-natured, and cheerful, with a liking for booze but an inability to hold it—an unreserved fellow who said the appeal of women was the size of their chests and the appeal of men the size of their muscles. Nuaza also said he was one of the smarter giantlings, whatever that was worth. Others had been a little less specific in their descriptions.

"Bald headed!"

"Strong! Amazing! Strong!"

“Always complaining about his wife and boasting about his daughter. Annoying, annoying, bleeeeeeeh!”

Vandal thought he sounded like a pretty decent fellow.

“But I don’t have many muscles. He’s not going to just tell me to get lost, is he?” Vandal asked.

“Unlikely. I’m just skin and bones myself, after all,” Nuaza said.

“Fair enough.”

They proceeded through the inside of the castle, amid the cracked walls, fragments of shattered reliefs, and broken pieces of pillars, eventually coming to the audience chamber. The door must have been thick and gaudy in its heyday, but its remains were now compensated for by something else—Sword King Borkz.

He was big even for a giantling, at over ten feet. His muscular body was covered with armor and cut a powerful figure even through his undead pallor. He had lost his right arm in the fighting with Divine Ice Spear Mikhail, and his huge double-handed sword had been snapped in two, but Borkz still looked imposing and powerful.

Vandal didn’t need Appraisal to see that. His constantly active Detect Danger: Death was supplying a warning not to piss this guy off at any cost.

“The priestling from the temple,” Borkz said. “And who’s this little brat?” With the right side of his head turned completely to bone, the Sword King glared suspiciously at Vandal. There was a warning in his voice, making it clear that he had some resistance to the Death Attribute Allure skill.

“This is Ghoul King Vandal, the Oracle Child,” Nuaza announced.

“What? A Ghoul King? So not a dhampir, but some kind of ghoul variant? A

female and a brat and a king, and this strange atmosphere. Quite the character,” Borkz mused.

“No, I’m not a ghoul. I’m a dhampir. And I’m male,” Vandal hurriedly corrected him.

“I got it.” Borkz had said ‘quite the character,’ but he didn’t seem especially interested in finding out more. “I don’t know what brought you here, and I’m not interested in finding out. Take up residence, if you want, or pick over the leavings of those shield dung and leave. I care not.” Borkz lifted his broken sword onto his left shoulder with a clank, looking down at Vandal. He looked relaxed, but if anything happened, that sword would come slicing down in an instant.

It didn’t look like Death Attribute Allure was working. Indeed, it only seemed to be putting Borkz further on guard.

I didn’t think it would be so ineffectual.

Vandal never expected Death Attribute Allure to work on absolutely every undead they encountered. There had always been the possibility of some resistance. But he hadn’t come up with what to do under those circumstances. If they were the enemy, he didn’t need to allure them, just find a way to defeat them. If they needed combat strength, he could put together other proposals. But someone who wasn’t interested in discussion and rejected the notion of cooperation was a harder sell.

I’ll just have to negotiate like I would with anyone else. That seemed like the only option.

“Sword King Borkz, I have something I would like your help with,” Vandal said.

“Sorry, but no thanks. I’ve got my own stuff to do,” Borkz immediately

replied.

Silence fell. It was almost as if the scouting mission had failed already.

No, no, Vandal thought. It was too soon to give up.

“Borkz,” he continued aloud, “I possess death attribute magic, a type of magic that has never existed in this world before. I might be able to use it to make whatever it is you wish for to come true.”

Negotiation was all about presenting something the other party wanted and then providing it in exchange for something you wanted. So, what did Borkz want? Did he want revenge on the Milg Shield Kingdom? For his body to be resurrected? Or maybe to find out what happened to his daughter after she escaped to Olbaum?

“ . . . A child like you, with such power?” Borkz asked.

“I’ve already done numerous things this world has never seen before,” Vandal said, puffing out his chest.



This wasn't false bravado, either. He could indeed use magic that had never existed before, meaning he could do things that no one had ever done. Even simple death attribute magic, like Death to Bacteria and Death to Bugs, would be hard for other attributes to replicate.

Borkz turned his one-eyed face down for a moment, thinking. He spoke without looking back up.

"What about the curse from a legendary magic item? Do you think you could break that?"

Legendary magic items had the potential to curse targets or the user with the kind of power that even the best Magicians could never break. It would take a hero with a magic item of the same caliber, or a god to break such a curse. Nuaza looked at Vandal with an expression, even on his mummified face, that suggested such a thing would surely be impossible, even for their precious Child.

"A curse? I can do that. I haven't used any MP yet today either," Vandal replied.

"You can?!"

"I find that highly unlikely!" Nuaza sounded just as surprised.

"This is a curse!" Borkz reiterated. "A curse from a legendary magic item! So powerful that no amount of gold spent at the temple could hope to break it!"

"That's right!" Nuaza said. "I pale in comparison to our high priest, the head of the temple or Healing Saint Geena, but none of them could hope to break this curse! Rather than purify it, Child, you will only become cursed yourself!"

“I often did—or was made to do, I should say, such things in the past,” Vandal said. “This is a curse, correct?”

From his perspective, curses were things that routinely got broken. He didn’t really understand what the problem was. Although, from the reaction of Borkz and Nuaza, he had worked out that on Ramda curses weren’t considered to be easy to break.

“Curses are basically maladies caused by magical power,” Vandal said. “For some of them, a grudge or intense hatred forms the core, but for the actual effects—sickness that can’t be healed, great misfortune, or certain acts not being able to be performed—to be triggered, MP is required for activation.”

In short, the actual effect of a curse needed magical power. For example, if you wanted to make someone you hated sick, just sending them a battered voodoo doll was little more than a mental attack—if that. If they were robust of mind, it wouldn’t have any effect at all. Even if rituals were performed, chants chanted, and sacrifices sacrificed, some magical power had to be supplied. A gemstone that brought the owner misfortune was just a gemstone without any magical power. All of this was how curses worked on Origin, which was a world operating on both science and magic.

“And my death attribute magic can absorb and dissipate energy, including magical power,” Vandal continued. “If I can cut off the magical power that creates the curse, I can break it.” All this technobabble was coming verbatim from the researcher who had shared it with him.

Breaking curses had also been difficult on Origin. Vandal remembered how excited the researchers were when the experiment succeeded. Annoyingly excited.

Successful experiments hadn’t meant he received any special treatment or

wishes granted, of course, and so he hadn't given any thought to how impressive it was to break—well, remove—a curse.

“So you're saying you can break the curse from a legendary magic item?” Borkz said.

“Yes. Unless it is an especially wily one.” Vandal was still puzzled about this line of questioning, however, because Borkz didn't appear to be cursed—excepting his undead nature.

“Good,” Borkz finally said. “If you can bring them back, then I'll become whatever you like. Your lacky, your minion, whatever. This might have no meaning for you, but I swear it, on the name of the Sword King.”

“Who are you talking about?” Vandal asked.

“Two of my comrades, Geena and Zandia. They are still being held by the damned curse of that bloody ice spear,” Borkz replied. “Please.”

That head, so high above Vandal all this time, now bowed down even lower than the child himself. Vandal looked upon the bald pate in front of him and replied.

“Very well.”

The memories of the undead were full of holes in regard to events after the Milg Shield Kingdom hero Divine Ice Spear Mikhail joined the attack on Talosheim and assaulted the city, meaning the details were unclear. Those events all happened around the time they were killed, coming before they turned into undead or immediately afterward.

It was clear, however, that Talosheim had fallen and that heroes had been defeated. Lastly, it was clear that Mikhail had attempted to destroy the legacy

of the Goddess Vida located beneath the castle but had been injured by the dragon golem defending it, and he retreated back to the Milg Shield Kingdom.

“I engaged that dung pile in the audience chamber, with Geena and Zandia,” Borkz said. “The branch of the adventurers’ guild that had opened in Talosheim ranked me as an A-rank adventurer. Geena had also gone up to A rank just before the war started. Zandia had still been B rank, but everyone said she could easily hit S rank in the future. Even with a legendary magical item, he was still just an A rank, like me. I thought we could handle him,” Borkz explained.

So the giantlings clearly had the advantage in terms of fighting strength and should have at least been able to defend their position.

Borkz continued. “You know the final result. They called me the Sword King. I didn’t think I could lose. Geena buffed me with her magic, and I used my sword to unleash one of my specialties, the old Dragon Killer. I was sure it would finish the job. I’d chopped off plenty of dragon heads with one swing. But the sword just shattered. I shouted in rage, going in for a punch, but that didn’t work either. Pathetic, huh? My sword and my sword arm, both frozen and shattered just moments apart.”

Adventurers were divided into ranks from G to A, with S at the top. These ranks weren’t just based on combat strength, but also on completion rate of quests, their general demeanor, and other information such as jobs and skills. That said, in theory, massive differences within the same rank would generally be considered impossible.

But today, Borkz learned that there were always exceptions. Especially within A and S.

A-rank adventurers were heroes who had transcended human limits. They killed so many dragons it was just taken for granted. But there was a big

variance within A-rank adventurers. Healing Saint Geena, for example, was a regular person with leanings toward the superhuman—just starting to poke out a little from the B rank, who were above-normal people but not yet superhuman.

There were those who were superhuman heroes but who very much kept the “human” part, not reaching the realm of those mythical heroes who fought evil gods. An example of that was Sword King Borkz.

Then there was Mikhail, one who had actually transcended his humanity, an A rank with the strength of an S.

“I was kissing the floor before I knew it,” Borkz said. “When I woke up, I was undead. I turned around and saw Zandia—or at least, a piece of her.”

With that, he pushed past the door to the audience chamber, the post he had guarded for the last 200 years. The air beyond the door was cold enough to cause a chill.

There wasn’t a single spark of light anywhere in the chamber, but Vandal and Nuaza both possessed Night Vision and could see as clearly as if it were midday. Vandal first noticed the hole in the chamber, and the ice pillar blocking it. That had to be the hole that reached down to where the relics of the goddess were located.

And then, caught up in the ice pillar . . . a trapped frozen hand, most likely belonging to a woman.

“Oh my!” Nuaza gasped. “I thought the reason we never saw their bodies for these 200 years was because you buried them, Borkz, but this explains it!”

“Indeed. Their bodies surely lie beyond this terrible ice,” Borkz said. “From the size, that looks like Zandia. After I got killed, she must have fought that dung

slinger too. Even after losing her hand she still tried to chase after him as he descended. Then she got defeated somewhere beyond that ice.”

The legendary magical spear from which Mikhail got his title possessed powerful ice magic. It was said to be able to freeze even souls and would never release the soul of a sinner after capturing one.

“I don’t know what happened in there,” Borkz said. “What I do know is that there’s no way to melt the ice. I can’t even chip it with brute force, and covering it with oil and setting it ablaze does nothing. Do you think you can melt it?”

“I can melt it,” Vandal confirmed, giving a nod right away. He had already investigated the ice while Borkz and Nuaza were talking, and he could sense some magical power from it. It seemed a little different from a curse, but similar enough for his idea to work. If he could eliminate the magical power, the ice would surely instantly melt, and the route underground would open.

“If that’s so, please do it. I don’t know if they’re corpses or turned into undead or what, but . . . I need to apologize to them.”

“Very well,” Vandal said.

He extended his own death magic, enveloping the ice and sucking its power away. It started to melt like normal ice in the sunshine. A few minutes later, Zandia’s hand was freed and the entrance underground appeared.

“What do you think, Child?” Nuaza asked.

“. . . I don’t see their spirits. Hold on a moment. I’ll see what I can learn from the hand,” Vandal said.

“What? Is that like, ‘forensic medicine’? Zakkato had wanted that job back in his world,” Borkz said.

So the Hero Zakkato wanted to become a forensic scientist back on Earth. He

had probably been pretty smart.

“No, not that. This is occult stuff,” Vandal replied.

He plucked Zandia’s hand up from the ground. It was tanned brown, clearly belonging to someone loved by the sun, but was now as cold as ice.

It’s heavy, but I’d better not say that.

The hand of the “Tiny Genius” was pretty damn big. This wasn’t because Vandal was a baby, but because Zandia had been so large. She must have been small, as her nickname suggested—small in giantling terms. The way Borkz talked about Zandia suggested she was still young, but based on her hand Vandal could tell she was well over six foot. She didn’t exactly fit into his definition of “tiny.”

Whatever. I need to check for residual memories. Death attribute magic had the ability to read residual memories from parts of corpses. But in most cases, doing so didn’t produce any useful information, so Vandal hadn’t had many chances to use this ability.

He pressed Zandia’s cold hand to his forehead and closed his eyes. Behind his eyelids he immediately saw a man with a spear that definitely looked deadly. Behind him there was another man, covered in blood on the floor, with a shattered sword still held in his hand.

His point of view fell to the ground. Then he was stabbed by the spear multiple times, probably to make sure she died. At the flickering edge of his vision, there was a brown-skinned woman already on the ground. A few seconds before darkness fell, he saw the man descending downward.

The man with the spear was Mikhail. The bloody, dead man was Borkz. The woman had to be Geena. If the residual memories were correct, Mikhail killed

Zandia and Geena here in the audience chamber, after he killed Borkz. Which meant the supposition that they had gone underground before it was closed by ice was incorrect.

So what happened to their bodies? Even if everything other than the hand hadn't been encased in protective ice, there should at least be bones. Not to mention Borkz had returned as a giantling zombie long before being reduced to bleached bones. He would have noticed their bodies.

Maybe someone had taken them away. Or ground down their bones. *But in that case, why is the hand still here—and why did they leave Borkz's body?* Vandal wasn't going to solve this alone, clearly.

"I saw residual memories showing me that the two of them died before Mikhail went underground," Vandal reported.

"What? How can that be? They aren't down there? There's no sign of them coming back up now, that's true . . ." Borkz was clearly distressed. "Where are they, then?!" He had been peering down into the hole with Nuaza, expecting the other two heroes to appear.

"Sorry. That I can't tell you," Vandal replied. "I only saw the memories from when this hand was chopped off. Maybe she was thrown into a panic when she lost her limb, and what I just saw was some terrible, imagined vision of her future. Even if what I saw was the truth, the two of them might not actually have been dead at that point and eventually given chase to Mikhail."

"Sounds like we won't know more until we go down," Borkz concluded.

"Yes. If I may ask, what exactly is down there?" Vandal asked.

"No idea. It's a holy place, after all."

"I thought as much."

“But the only way to discern the truth is to go down there,” Nuaza said. “Shall we, Lord Borkz, Child?”

It seemed that this talk of holy places wasn’t going to stop them going down there now. Maybe it didn’t matter, now that Mikhail had violated the place, or maybe it was because Vandal was the Child. He couldn’t be sure.

Vandal peered into the hole from the rim to see a bunch of thick stone rods sticking out of the wall, forming a spiral staircase leading downward. Vandal made a Lemures and sent it on ahead, and then the three of them started downward. Once they reached the bottom, a temple-like corridor continued on in front of them.

There were no traps or trials in the way. Maybe the goddess had absolute confidence in the dragon golem she had left behind, or maybe Mikhail had destroyed everything other than the golem. There was one thing, though—anything even resembling a door was tightly sealed with ice.

“I thought Mikhail was badly injured and ran for his life, but this looks like he had a little more leeway,” Vandal commented. Even as he spoke, Vandal was using death attribute magic to melt the ice, in the same way as he did above. It wasn’t a difficult task, but it did start to get boring after dozens of times. “Maybe he was worried about someone stealing the spear that he left here or finishing off the dragon golem, thanks to all the damage Mikhail had already done to it, and taking the treasure for themselves.”

“Huh. That dung sniffer must have also made the ice in the audience chamber after his escape. How did he do that, then?” Borkz asked. “He threw his ice spear into the dragon golem and ran off, right?”

“Good point,” Vandal said. The ice Vandal was currently melting was clearly magical, meaning even fire couldn’t melt it. Something of this level couldn’t

have been created by normal attribute magic. This magic ice was something that could only be created by the magic spear, that national treasure of the Milg Shield Kingdom. Which raised the question—how had Mikhail closed the doors and made this magic ice after he lost the spear?

“This is pretty weak, given I didn’t think of this for the last 200 years, but—that’s odd, isn’t it? What do you think it means?” Borkz asked.

“Maybe this ice has nothing to do with the magic spear,” Nuaza suggested. “It might be the product of some kind of special magic created by Mikhail.”

“Or maybe the holder of the spear can pass through the ice, and he made all this on the way in to stop enemies attacking him from behind,” Vandal said.

But none of the ideas they floated really seemed to really fit. “I’ve melted us a path, anyway,” Vandal said. “I don’t see the spirits of the two heroes either.”

“Hm. I wonder what happened to them,” Borkz said.

Putting conjecture and guesswork aside, the three of them advanced. They weren’t here to find out what happened back then, but to find the undead, corpses, or spirits of Zandia and Geena. Vandal’s head was filled with questions, his curiosity piqued, but he could think about all this later.

“You have taken a liking to that, have you?” Borkz asked, indicating the hand that had belonged to Zandia and that Vandal was still carrying in his arms.

“Not exactly. It didn’t feel right to leave it up there,” Vandal replied. He hadn’t wanted to just leave it on the dusty, dirty floor, and Borks and Nuaza hadn’t seemed to want it, so he had used magic to halt its decay and carried it down with him.

There was no more special meaning to it than that. But Borkz wasn’t finished. “So you don’t like it?”

It seemed like “yes” or “no” were his only options. Vandal looked at Zandia’s hand again, really taking it in. The skin was brown and smooth, looking handsome at a glance, although on closer inspection, callouses covered the fingers. Likely the product of all that fighting with a staff. The smell of blood from the severed cross-section was tickling his nose, even after 200 years.

“If I really have to choose one, then yes, I like it,” Vandal said.

“What about the shape of her wrist? That doesn’t bother you? She was always complaining about it being too fat or badly shaped,” Borkz said.

“Fat? Badly shaped?” Vandal took another look, but nothing seemed particularly out of place. It was simply big. “It doesn’t bother me,” he finally replied.

“Oh, that’s good! The little lady liked older men, but she’d still be happy to hear that! You take good care of her!”

“... Take care of her?” Vandal said, unsure where this was coming from.

“Yes! That’s the spirit!”

“I wasn’t agreeing, just repeating. What do you mean, take care of her?” This conversation was giving Vandal some nasty flashbacks, but he kept those feelings under control.

“Well, I just mean, we haven’t found their bodies or seen their spirits all the way down here, right? If by some miracle the two of them got out alive, I’d be thrilled. Or maybe someone carried their bodies out.”

The two of them had been heroes and Zandia the second princess. There was a good chance they had been taken back by the Milg Shield Kingdom army to put their heads on a spike somewhere. Kachia and the others from Milg hadn’t mentioned it, but what happened to those bodies might simply have not been

passed down to this period of time.

“If that’s the case, you’ll search for their bodies, won’t you?”

“. . . I mean, it might take a while to find them,” Vandal said. “I’m not planning on returning to the Milg Shield Kingdom any time soon.”

Borkz’s request had been to melt the magic ice, so Vandal half-considered their business to be complete at the point he had achieved that feat, but there was a look in Borkz’s eyes suggesting he wasn’t on the same page. But getting the bodies of the two heroes back from the Milg Shield Kingdom didn’t sound like such a bad idea. Vandal finally gave a nod of agreement, and Borkz’s half a lip lifted in a smile.

“Okay. That’s good. Which means, you’ll want some kind of additional reward. In which case, when we recover the little lady and Geena’s bodies, you can go ahead and do them,” Borkz said.

“Excuse me? You mean—turn them into undead?!” Vandal exclaimed.

But he was the only one surprised.

“Oh, yes, a wonderful idea. Well said, Lord Borkz!” Nuaza said. He was meant to be priest—even if only an apprentice—but this seemed to have deeply moved him. If he had any water left in his body, he would have been weeping.

“Lady Zandia was the second princess of Talosheim, and Lady Geena the highest authority in the Temple of Vida. Binding ties with the Oracle Child will make the prophecy come true for sure! Prosperity and glory for us once more!” Nuaza said gleefully.

“I’m sorry, have you got the wrong idea,” Vandal said. “You make it sound like some kind of strategic marriage.”

The two of them were very likely dead. At least for the moment, the only

thing they had was Zandia's hand.

"There's no problem at all. That's only her left hand," Borkz added.

"Indeed! They can still exchange rings!"

"I don't see what that possibility has to do with anything," Vandal replied. He wondered how things had jumped to marriage. He did recall that Japan, back on Earth, had once had a culture among the nobility that allowed those who died unmarried to get hitched posthumously. Maybe Zakkato had brought that into his world as well.

Nuaza wasn't listening, anyway. "If Lady Geena and Lady Zandia can become allies of the Child and eventually aid in striking down those who obey Divine Alda, I am sure they will be happy to return as undead," the priest continued.

Borkz bellowed with laughter. "And the three of us can take on the Milg Shield Kingdom once more!"

"No, no, hold on. This oracle stuff is one thing, but the ancient comments from the vampire true source have nothing to do with this," Vandal said.

He was starting to worry that giantlings' ears were too far off the ground to hear his voice.

"I do want to ask, why don't you consider that desecration of the dead? Defiling the names of the heroes? What about that?" Even without considering the reactions of the God of Law and Life Alda, on Earth and on Origin turning corpses into undead (theoretically or otherwise) had been strongly considered a desecration of the dead and violation of divine law. There hadn't actually been undead on Earth, of course, but there had been countless myths and folktales incorporating the concept as religious taboo.

The same held true in fiction. There had been countless tales about the

various ways bringing back the dead could fail, includes many in which the ones who attempted it met their own demise. When the bad guy offered to bring back the main character's loved ones, the main character might struggle with the offer, but in the end, they kicked such temptations to the curb and carried on into the future. You never heard, "Are you serious? Yes please!"

Origin had magic and undead, so this trend was even more present. They had laws against the creation of undead, with simply the attempt enough to get you detained, though the scientists at the military research facility where Vandal had been a lab rat hadn't really cared about that kind of morality. Vandal himself, of course, also had no issues with the making of undead. If he did, he wouldn't still have his mother hanging around, or his small army of bony minions.

That didn't mean he had forgotten that the idea would probably be distasteful to others. Which was why he had thought Nuaza, a priest, and Borkz, who had been friends with Geena and Zandia during their lifetimes, wouldn't want them turned into undead. He hadn't even considered the possibility, not wanting to make things worse with the giantlings—although, if the two in question had already been undead, he probably would have at least tried to scout them. So Vandal was surprised when Borkz said the exact opposite of his own preconceptions and then Nuaza happily agreed.

"Cut it out, you're talking to undead here, remember?" Borkz said.

"That's right. The goddess herself turned the Hero Zakkato into undead and brought him back to life," Nuaza added.

"Yeah, that's a good point," Vandal admitted.

That was what the legends said, now that he considered it. It sounded like the Goddess Vida didn't have anything against undead—although he only had the

word of her undead followers, so far. Her living followers might not feel as accepting. He could deal with that hurdle once he left Talosheim and headed back into human society, however.

“Well, if they don’t mind it, you won’t hear complaints from me.”

The Sword King was coup enough, but also bringing the Healing Saint and the Tiny Genius on side as undead would definitely bolster his forces. If the two of them wished for it, he could therefore see no reason not to turn them into undead.

“There you go!” Borkz said. “Now that you can get some good women out of it, you feel like making the effort! That’s how a man works!”

“I’m not even three years old,” Vandal countered.

“People don’t change, from the cradle to the grave.”

“... I’m not sure that applies here, for all sorts of reasons.”

“No need to bicker,” Nuaza interjected. “Child, you will find that the two of them were most beautiful.”

“Were,” of course, being the key word there. They were likely just beautiful bones by now. Vandal almost pointed that out but decided to keep his mouth shut. They weren’t going to listen to anything he had to say. They said that heroes were fond of sensual pleasures, and that seemed to apply even for undead.

They continued along in this fashion and eventually came to a door that could rightly be called massive, even when compared to the giantling Borkz. It was also sealed up by ice, of course, but part of the door had cracked, allowing them to see inside.

“That’s the dragon golem. It might not have finished that dung eater off on

the spot, but I can see how it did so much damage. I'm shuddering just standing here," Borkz said.

Beyond the door there was an open space, in which dozens of giantlings would have fitted, and in the center there still stood a massive iron dragon. Some details were obscured by the ice, but even then, it wasn't a pretty sight. Its proud head and whip-like tail had been shattered; the chunks of metal that comprised them scattered across the floor. Its right arm was hanging off at the shoulder, and there was a spear thrust into its chest. Deep cracks covered its body and it looked ready to collapse at any moment.

"Indeed. We had better not go inside," Vandal agreed. "If I melt the ice on this door, we're dead. For good, this time."

The golem was still active. And, damaged though it was, it could still kill them. If he melted the ice on this door, they would die. That was what Vandal's Detect Danger: Death was telling him.

"Could the two of them be beyond the door?" Borkz asked.

"If they were turned into undead, the golem probably destroyed them," Vandal replied.

"And if they are corpses, they could be in the ice," Borkz noted. It seemed unlikely that even a broken-down golem would be able to resist attacking undead giantlings. Plus, in the fight with Mikhail, the chamber got covered in ice. The bodies of Zandia and Geena could be under some of that.

"You don't know how to go in there without the golem attacking?" Vandal asked.

"I'm sure the king knew some way," Nuaza replied, shaking his own mummy head. It sounded like the king either didn't turn into undead or hadn't lasted

200 years. Vandal wasn't going to get any answers without a spirit to talk to.

"I guess we'll have to leave this until we're strong enough to defeat that golem," Vandal said.

"Good idea. I don't have my arm or my sword at the moment," Borkz agreed.

Even if they did defeat the golem, it seemed unlikely that the bodies they were looking for were inside. If they found out for sure, however, then they could think about where to search next.

"Even if we can't find their bodies, we can use the goddess's relic to create new ones, and give them those," Borkz suggested. "If you're a Medium, you should be able to use Summon Spirit to call back their souls."

"Actually, I'm not a Medium," Vandal admitted. "I can't use Summon Spirit on a spirit I haven't encountered before."

"What? Is that so?" Nuaza exclaimed. "You seem so close to undead such as ourselves, Child, that I was sure you had Medium among your jobs."

"Color me shocked too," Borkz agreed. "So how can you see spirits? How can you see memories from the little lady's hand?"

"We'll get to that!" Vandal said. "What do you mean that the relic can create new bodies?"

"What do you think? The relic of the Goddess Vida is an incomplete device for resurrecting the dead," Borkz replied, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Long ago, the Goddess Vida had tried to resurrect the Hero Zakkato in order to create the vampire race. But even the goddess of life herself had found difficulty in returning the dead to life. She had been forced to experiment with all sorts of different approaches. One of those was the relic now located

beneath Talosheim.

She had planned to use this revival device to create a new body for Zakkato, restoring him to how he had appeared in life. The physical aspect had been successful, but without a soul, the resulting body had been nothing but a lump of meat, unreceptive to the powers of even Vida, the Goddess of Life. The only thing her device could do was recreate the body of the deceased, intact and undamaged. Realizing that was the extent of its power, the goddess sealed the device away. Though incomplete, it could potentially help her children in the future. She also didn't want the remnants of the Demon King's forces to abuse it, however, and so she created the golem from her own lifeforce to stand guard.

"And that's the prize that lies beyond the dragon golem. Wonderful," Vandal breathed. A device that could perfectly recreate the intact body of the deceased.

If such a thing were real, then surely Vandal could provide a spirit to such a body, and that would equal nothing less than actual resurrection.

"Nuaza. I'm happy to be this Oracle Child. Would you let me use that device?" Vandal asked.

He had to get his hands on it. That was how he could bring back his mother!

The Death Mage

CHAPTER TWO
FRESH RESOLVE

Chapter Two: Fresh Resolve

Vandal was surrounded by incredible warmth, melting away his exhaustion. He closed his eyes, stretched out his arms and legs, and settled into doing as little as possible. Taking a bath like this really reminded him that he had once been Japanese—even if that was over 20 years ago at this point.

How long has it been since I stretched out in a bath like this? Decades, surely. Since I was a kid on Earth, Vandal mused. While asking himself these pointless questions, Vandal recalled the events that had transpired after he had learned of the incomplete resurrection device beneath the castle.

First, he made a new arm for Borkz. He had used Golem Creation to gather up the shards of his arm from the audience chamber and formed them back into an arm shape. Then he placed it on Borkz's shoulder and gave it some magical power, imagining regeneration. When he did, the flesh extended out from Borkz's shoulder and reconnected the arm.

"Wow, that's nasty!"

Not the reaction Vandal would have preferred from Borkz, but oh well.

It seemed that Vandal's death attribute magic could do more than fix the damage to skeletons' bones: it could also repair zombie flesh and skin. He had already decided to call this ability Fix Corpse.

He had been unable to fix the right side of Borkz's face, however. Imagination was a large part of magic, and the half-skeleton impression made by Borkz's current face was too strong for Vandal to break out of.

"I don't know how it works, but don't worry. My right eye can still see, even though I don't have an eyeball. With my arm back, I can fight. This is more

handsome, anyway!” the giantling cackled.

“Very true,” Nuaza said.

“Shut it! I’m talking to the kid!” Borkz snapped, angry at Nuaza’s quick agreement, but overall, he seemed very happy. He had to be pleased to have his arm back, allowing him to fight again.

Vandal, for his part, was still a little shocked to learn that a good person could have such a foul mouth, like Borkz. Up until now everyone Vandal encountered who talked like the giantling had been complete trash. This might give him a little experience for dealing with such people after he entered the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom. At the very least, that he wouldn’t just think they were an enemy and reflexively attack.

Then he had proceeded to check over the magic items and other supplies that remained in Talosheim. Even with Borkz getting his arm back, there was little hope of defeating the damaged underground dragon golem. They needed a boost to their basic fighting strength.

Most of the real valuable goods had been taken by the first princess when she retreated, and anything left over had then been snaffled by the Milg Shield Kingdom, so the legendary and high-grade magic items, the national-treasure-level stuff, was all gone.

“There’s nothing left but some grade five potions and commonplace low-grade magic items. Most of that stuff is rotten or rusty,” Vandal observed.

“Well, it has been 200 years,” Borkz said.

There was the stuff the giantling undead were still wearing, but Vandal didn’t feel like making them give that up.

“No matter,” Borkz said. “We’ll have to go pillage a dungeon or two. No one

has been in there since we all got killed, right? Even a grade D dungeon will be packed with mid-level magic items.” The giantling paused for a moment. “What about the adventurers’ guild?”

“There was fighting there too, I’m afraid,” Nuaza reported, shaking his head. The guild would have had a stash of potions for emergencies, including some that provided temporary buffs. “The adventurers stationed there who fought back and shared our fate used the potions, and all the magic items were pillaged. About the only thing left over there is the Job Change Chamber.”

“Hold on! What did you just—” Vandal exclaimed.

“Bah! Sounds like the outsiders went above and beyond. I should have taken them for a drink more often,” Borkz said.

“You still can. Some of them. They turned into undead too,” Nuaza said.

“Good point! I’ve been out of things in the castle for 200 years, I kinda forgot! Ah, but there’s no tavern to take them to!” Borkz realized.

Nuaza chuckled. “Well, yes, that is a problem.”

“Sorry, just going back to what you just said,” Vandal piped up. “The Job Change Chamber in the guild is operational?”

Every guild branch had a Job Change Chamber, a vital facility in human society. Whether it was the Amidd Empire, the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom, or Talosheim, that was always going to be the case. It sounded like the Milg Shield Kingdom forces hadn’t bothered to take the time to destroy it, just leaving it intact. Borkz and the others weren’t people anymore, they were monsters. Undead. They couldn’t change jobs, and so they didn’t need the chamber.

“We can use that, right?” Vandal said. This was great news for Vandal and the ghouls, who had been unable to interact with human society and get access to a

Job Change Chamber.

To be more accurate, it was definitely good news for the ghouls. They were treated as monsters in society, but they were actually one of Vida's new races, meaning they could take jobs. As proof of this, the former humans like Talea and Kachia had become ghouls while keeping their previous jobs. And yet Vigaro and Zadilis had continued to hone their skills without the advantages of taking a job. If all the ghouls could take jobs, they would receive the benefits from status and skill modifiers, significantly increasing their fighting strength.

In Vandal's case, he was still under the curse "Unable to enter existing jobs" from Rodocolte, meaning that even if he could use the chamber, he probably wouldn't be able to change. But he had still been wanting to give it try. The possibility wasn't zero.

Vandal therefore hurried happily back to the others in order to impart this good news, but a shocking development awaited him.

"Boy. You are taking a holiday until your birthday," Zadilis said. "That's an order."

Zadilis and the others had known that Vandal wouldn't just accept being told to take a break and had all got together to gang up on him.

"Hold on! The resurrection device! The Job Change Chamber!" Vandal protested.

"None of which will matter if you collapse! Boy, your resistance to everything is close to its limit," Zadilis admonished.

She's right, young master! You are almost a terminal case! Sam said.

Please, Vandal, you have to rest! If you don't rest for me then I'll have to return to the cycle of resurrection! Dalshia said.

None of them were willing to listen to him. The women had been looking out the window, trying to think how to get Vandal to rest, and seen him trotting toward them in a chillingly bizarre fashion, like nothing he had ever done before, which had only intensified their desire to get him to rest.

He had only been trying to skip. That clearly wasn't one of his talents.

His eyes always had that dead fish look, so he didn't think there was any need to panic. He protested as such, but he was unable to overcome their demands. Once they started turning on the waterworks, his own arguments had dried up.

The Job Change Chamber wasn't going anywhere, and even changing some jobs around wasn't going to let them defeat that dragon golem any time soon, and so taking the ten days before his birthday to relax might not be such a bad idea.

Furthermore, he wasn't being forced to do nothing at all. He continued his alchemy training, for just one hour a day, and did all sorts of other things in the name of "rest."

For example, repairing the public baths.

There had been public baths in Talosheim. Maybe this was also thanks to Zakkato, but the giantlings of Talosheim loved bathing. There were five public baths in the city and massive baths in the castle. The baths themselves were made of stone rather than wood, more in the European style of ancient Rome, and the saunas were also closer to the Western style. Even the rampaging Milg Shield Kingdom forces didn't have the time to destroy the public baths, which weren't temples or defensive facilities, so the buildings were relatively untouched. There had been some magic items that could make fire, and some gold, but the attackers had carried far more valuable goods than those. The baths had then simply been left untouched for 200 years, meaning all of them—

including the one in the castle—were a mess when Vandal finally got around to checking them out.

Of the five in the city, the three on the outskirts had been swallowed by the demon barrens and torn apart by trees and other vegetation growing through them. One of the two in the center was simply a pile of rubble, like a shot of magic had exploded right in the center. The other was intact but had been overrun by mushrooms. Not any old mushrooms, either—monsters, including mobile walking mushrooms and toxic spore-launching poison mushrooms. They weren't all that powerful. Vandal had cooked some of them, and they had been good. The walking mushrooms tasted like eringi and the poison mushrooms like shiitake.

In the end, he decided to fix up the baths in the castle. Rain had leaked in here, turning the tub into more of pond, and there were even a number of skeletons enjoying the waters when he first arrived. It seemed that the giantlings really did love bathing, considering they were proactive about it after becoming undead.

Vandal used Golem Creation to fix the leaks, the walls, and the cracked tiles, and then cleaned the place up. This was the castle of big and hardy giantlings. Two hundred years of wear washed off pretty quickly, and the baths could soon be used once more.

The ghouls, who had only bathed in cold water in the past, quickly took to the culture of bathing in warm water, and now every day saw a line forming for the relaxing baths.

Once I'm back in action I need to fix up the other baths, Vandal mused. The castle one is big but it's still going to crack under all this pressure. This does feel good, though. I only ever got to take showers on Origin . . .

He heard what sounded like a sudden scream, and then his head was grabbed by someone's clawed hand, dragging him up out of the water.

"Vandal! You drown?!" Vigaro exclaimed.

"No. I was just warming up, with my head under the water," Vandal replied.

The public baths he would probably visit once he reached the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom would likely be closer to the size he was accustomed to. This was a castle of giantlings, meaning the bath was deep and wide. Even the women were well over six feet, meaning the almost three-year-old Vandal couldn't keep his head above water even if he stood on tippytoes.

During the repairs, he had made some steps at the side of the bath, creating a shallow area so that he could remain above the waterline, meaning only lack of attention or an accident would put him in danger. In this case, he intended to submerge himself.

"I was going to remain underwater and count to 100," Vandal explained.

"You die!" Vigaro shot back.

"No, I'll be fine. I can probably do five minutes," Vandal replied casually. With his Resist Maladies skill, he had at least five minutes before he would run out of air. Even when that ran out, he could also use death attribute magic to buy more time.

"No. Don't. You want to give heart attack?" Vigaro asked.

"Okay, okay," Vandal replied. No more submerging in the baths for anyone.

After his bath was finished, Vandal was at a bit of a loss.

What can I do to rest next?

There were still a few days before his birthday. He needed more ways to pass the time. It wouldn't be healthy to sleep all day, and he couldn't eat all day either. He could stare into space and just think . . . but that wasn't his thing either. When he tried to think of the ways he had passed the time in the past, it felt like he had always had something to keep him busy. Often, he would have preferred to have more time, not less.

Training with non-attribute magic and alchemy, making walnut and herb sauce, crushing up acorns, and training his undead. Time had passed quickly when he was in the forest demon barrens. Now he had been ordered to take time off, however, so such activities were prohibited. He might have spent it entertaining himself, but there wasn't much he could think of doing. He didn't have game consoles or a PC like back on Earth, or a TV, or a phone. This world probably had toys and boardgames, at least, but he didn't have those either. Not that, upon reflection, he had ever really had those things on Earth.

There had been no leeway in the survival-of-the-fittest demon barrens to expand out into entertainment. Even if they found such things on the loot from dead adventurers, nobody had been concerned about hanging onto toys and games. They did have a few books, but they were just practical texts about magic or monsters, and he had already read them all multiple times. There had been some books among the things he took from bandits prior to reaching the demon barrens, but those were similar material and he'd read them numerous times too.

What do people in this world do for fun anyway? Vandal wondered. He decided to ask Kachia, who had previously been an adventurer, and Nuaza, who had a good memory of things from when he was alive.

"Entertainment other than board games or reading?" Kachia said, seemingly

happy enough to fill him in. “Hmmm. Drinking? Watching plays? Street performers? Maybe concert performances, for the upper classes. And listening to poets and bards perform. After that, shopping.” Kachia told him about the entertainment enjoyed by the regular folk of the Milg Shield Kingdom, as well as some of the things enjoyed by the nobles.

The Talosheim outdoor theater was a nest of monsters, however, and the street performers’ best act was probably picking up their own bones; there didn’t seem to be any musical or poetry performers, either.

“In addition to the things Kachia told you,” Nuaza added, “there’s also singing songs, and gambling, like betting on coin tosses. Oh, and praying in the shrine, of course.”

Vandal was pretty sure that last one didn’t count as entertainment. He had also already decided that he was going to wait until his body was old enough before trying drinking or gambling. Regardless of his appearance, he was a hothead underneath, meaning he was sure gambling wouldn’t be good for him, and drinking in this body wouldn’t do anything other than hone his Resist Maladies skill.

“What else . . .” Vandal pondered.

“Why don’t you hang out with us today?” Kachia offered.

“Huh?” Vandal wondered what that meant.

“Don’t overthink it,” she replied.

He spent the rest of the day chatting with Kachia and the other former adventurers about the adventurers’ guild and teaching them how to play rock-paper-scissors. Then he checked in on Bildy and the Living Dead, did some alchemy training, and the day came to an end.

The rock-paper-scissors that Vandal taught Kachia that day quickly spread from them out into Talosheim, and in the future would spread across the entire Vangaia Continent.

The next day, Vandal continued his search for entertainment by visiting the black goblins, anubis, and orcas. Before going to sleep the previous night, he thought that hanging out with the kids might be a good way to pass the time. They grew quickly, meaning they were already bigger than Vandal, but they were still the youngest members of their current community. He was sure they would be playing tag or high-and-go-seek, and would be happy to let him join in.

The treatment by his uncle on Earth had meant he never really got to experience that kind of thing, or even really had friends. This felt like a chance to forget his painful youth on Earth. Vandal didn't know if his heart could survive a rejection.

Chatting with Kachia and the others had been fun but playing with kids was something else entirely.

Observe closely! This is how you use a dagger!

“Aim carefully at the target! Fire!”

“This is the pole battle tech Skull Cracker. It can crush the hardest skill into powder, and take the body with it, but it leaves you open afterward, so be careful!”

As it turned out, they were hard at work training.

Eventually they would need to fend for themselves and their settlement in the demon barrens. They were already training for that purpose. It might have

looked hard on them, from the outside, but considering the cultures of other monsters, these kids were pretty lucky. Monsters like kobolts and goblins didn't give their young any kind of education. They told them nothing but the basics, just the stuff to keep the pack running, such as needing to follow the orders of the boss. Monsters generally learned skills and knowledge by watching others or figuring things out for themselves, and obtained weapons, armor, and tools by making or stealing them. Goblins and kobolts reproduced quickly, having lots of children in a short period of time. They only needed a third of them, if that, to make it to adulthood for their numbers to work out. That meant the pack could survive even if only those who were lucky enough to hunt their own food and make their own weapons survived.

Spending the effort and time to help those lagging behind to catch up wasn't even an option. In the case of orcs, they were barely smart enough to use tools anyway, which didn't help. It took the higher types, Noble Orcs like Bugogan, to think of passing out arms among his orcs.

Here, the monster kids received gear to train with, and the ghouls and giantling undead were teaching them how to build their muscles and the basics of combat. Those with an aptitude for magic got to learn that too. Once they grew up, they would be provided high-quality gear made from monster materials by Talea. This was all a far better environment for them than normal monsters.

"Three times three is nine. Three times four is twelve."

"Four times five is twenty. Four times six is . . ."

The orcas were practicing their times tables. Vandal had been a little surprised to learn that even though they lived more like monsters, all races like the ghouls could do math. They could handle subtraction, addition, division,

multiplication, and simple stuff without any problems. Calculating vitality and magical power required these skills. Their own vitality told them how much more damage they could take, and their magic power how many more times they could cast a spell or use battle techs. They wouldn't be able to survive without such skills, meaning they were also being taught to the orcas.

Vandal was the one who spread the concept of times tables among the ghouls. He figured that maybe they simply hadn't been aware of them, and humans learned them like normal out in society, but that didn't seem to be the case either. Kachia had told him that people on this continent, at least, didn't use the system.

It seemed that the heroes like Zakkato hadn't spread all of their knowledge across this world. They had been summoned into a terrible conflict with the Demon King. They probably hadn't had much time to educate kids. It was even possible those like the hero Bellwood, who were opposed to the knowledge and culture of Earth taking hold in Ramda, could have been going around wiping out people who knew about rock-paper-scissors or the times tables.

"Huh? Are you at a loose end, boy?" Zadilis asked.

She had been giving a lesson using clay tablets rather than paper to teach numbers, but maybe the lesson had finished while Vandal was zoning out.

"Just to make sure you understand, I don't require your aid. These clay golems are more than enough."

She was referring to the tablets that she and the students were using. Paper was a precious commodity in Ramda, and parchment made from sheep skin no better an option, with no way for the ghouls in the demon barrens or the group of undead here in Talosheim to easily get their hands on the raw materials, or covert them into the final product. Vandal had tried to make some fibers from

the plants they did have available, but all he had learned were the limits of Golem Creation. The technique did not run to making paper. Although he was sure he would try again once he leveled the skill up.

Instead, he had turned some clay scooped from the ground into golems, and these operated instead of notebooks. They used a wooden stick instead of a pencil to inscribe letters, and once the “page” was full, a single word to the golem would wipe it clean again. Vandal thought this technique could also probably be used to make pottery in the future, but that would mean he’d start having to worry about the quality of the clay and then make a furnace to fire it. That was all too much work at the moment.

There had been pottery in Talosheim, but the potter had been turned into undead and then destroyed by monsters, and his son had fled with the first princess without ever finishing his training.

“No, not really,” Vandal said defensively. “I just thought I might play with some of the kids.”

“A kid, playing with kids,” Zadilis commented.

“Yes. I am a kid,” Vandal confirmed.

“Then you’ll have to wait a little longer,” Zadilis told him. “I know. Would you like to play a board game with me?”

“A board game?” Vandal asked.

“Indeed. We found one gathering dust in a corner of the castle playroom.”

Here in Ramda, board games were considered the pastime of the elite and the intellectual. They had a lot of pieces and complex rules, meaning commoners really couldn’t understand them.

“The board turned out to be too heavy to move, of course. There are about

fifty different pieces, and each player chooses eleven of them to start with.”

It sounded like Talosheim board games were no different from the others Vandal had heard about.

“Have you learned the rules yet?” Vandal asked.

“No. I don’t have that kind of time either,” Zadilis replied. It sounded like they would have to learn on the go. Maybe the instructions had been found along with the board and pieces.

“Why don’t we play something a little simpler?” Vandal asked. He turned some of the one thing Talosheim had a lot of—rubble—into a golem, and then got to work.

“Oh my,” Zadilis said. It seemed that using magic to have some fun was within the parameters of what Zadilis considered “resting,” and she watched what Vandal was doing with interest.

First, he created a game board from stone with squares cut into it, and then he made thin disc-shaped pieces from white stone. He followed that by making the same number of pieces from black stone, and then he combined each of the white pieces with one of the black.

“This is game called reversi,” Vandal said.

“There’s only one type of piece?” Zadilis confirmed.

“That’s right. You’ll pick it up quickly,” Vandal replied.

Reversi only had one type of piece, and the rules were much simpler than chess. It was also much easier to make using Golem Creation.

There was another reason Vandal chose reversi, of course. Vandal was good at it. When his uncle had taken his cousins away on a trip, leaving Vandal in the

house, Vandal spent some of his time secretly playing with a reversi set. He had played it online, too. He knew the rules of chess but had only ever played it for intelligence tests in the lab. Those had not been fun.

“You need to surround the opponent’s color with your own, like this, to change them to your color. The one with the most pieces at the end is the winner,” Vandal explained.

“I see. This does look interesting,” Zadilis said.

With the clicking of stone pieces, Vandal enjoyed playing reversi for the first time in more than twenty years. Zadilis seemed to be enjoying it too. The stone pieces were heavier than the sets sold on Earth, but the two of them were strong. Vandal won the first match, but that was to be expected. Zadilis didn’t take it lying down.

“The one who takes the corners has the advantage,” Zadilis said. After just one match she had realized one of the definite truths of reversi, which Vandal himself had taken years to work out. From the second game onward they were much more evenly matched.

“I never lost when playing alone,” Vandal commiserated.

Zadilis just gave him a look.

“Please, don’t pity me. If you’re feeling sympathetic, stay out of the corners.”

“That’s completely unrelated. There’s no room for emotion in a match like this, boy,” Zadilis replied.

They continued to play together for a while long, losing themselves in the competition.

“King! I try too!”

“That looks like fun. Let me get in on it.”

“Oh my, a board game! How elegant. Can you teach me, Lord Van?”

The black goblins and other kids had finished their lessons and training, and they had gathered around Vandal and Zadilis, joined by their teachers, ghouls, and giantling undead, all peering intently at the action on the board. Even Borkz and Talea showed up. Vandal ended up making close to twenty reversi sets by the end of the day.

“Another day of fun, then, but . . . I’m not sure it counts as taking a break,” Vandal said. Having to mass-produce reversi boards for everyone sure felt like doing some work.

So long as you enjoyed yourself, does it matter? Dalshia said with a smile. Of course, using 100,000 MP wasn’t even 1 percent of what Vandal had available. He didn’t need to rest to recover that amount. *Reversi is fun, too. Ah, put my piece there please.*

“Okay. I’m going here,” Vandal responded. The clatter of the stones was actually quite peaceful.

The Milg Shield Kingdom didn’t have any fun, simple board games like this, Sam commented. *Ah, Saria, I was going for that corner! You’re not stealing from me again, are you?*

All’s fair in battle, father, his daughter replied.

The two of you are really putting your body and soul into this battle! Rita said from the sidelines. *Even if you don’t have one of those things!*

And so even after Vandal and Dalshia had gone to bed, the sound of the locals playing reversi continued to click throughout the city.

“Hahaha, Lord Borkz! I win again!”

“Raaagh! Why?! Why can’t I win?!”

“Because don’t take corner!”

“How did you put it? A real man doesn’t cower in the shadows?”

“Shut it! All of you, silence!”

“You won’t defeat me like that, Lord Borkz.”

If you happen to hear a clicking sound on the streets of Talosheim, it might be the bones of two skeletons clacking together, and it might be those same undead enjoying a game of reversi nearby.

Name: Sword King Borkz

Rank: 9

Race: Zombie Hero

Level: 5

——Passive Skills

[Night Vision] [Brute Strength: Level 7] [Resist Physical: Level 5] [Attack Up With Sword Equipped (Large)] [Defense Up With Non-Metallic Armor (Medium)] [Instinct: Level 3] [Spirit Pollution: Level 5]

——Active Skills

[Sword King Tech: Level 1] [Brawling Proficiency: Level 7] [Bow Proficiency: Level 7]

[Armor Mastery: Level 7] [Limit Break: Level 5] [Dismantle: Level 5]

[Command: Level 2] [Cooperation: Level 4] [Teacher: Level 1]

——Physical Maladies

One-Armed (Resolved)



Vandal spent three days slacking off, under orders, but the giantling undead were working in a frenzy, almost as if they wanted to make up for the lost time.

“Woodcutter kills tree!”

One of them smashed a two-handed axe into the trunk of a tree, as hard as possible.

“Giiiiiiiiiii!” The plant—a tree-monster called an ent—gave a scream. The woodcutter continued to mercilessly chop, the tree flailing its branches to the end but unable to resist the axe.

“Boss! What are we doing with this tree?” the giantling with the axe called out.

“Put it with the rest of the lumber, for now! The Child is taking some time off!”

The woodcutter shouted his understanding, trimmed the smaller branches off the ent, and then placed all the pieces in the lumber storage. These giantlings had been woodcutters in life, but bodies made of bones or with a little flesh rotting off weren’t going to slow them down now.

“We need to drive all the others monsters out of Talosheim, right away!”

“That’s right. Now the Child is here, we have to act.”

“Damn, I just want to go and get some salt!”

They were working to restore Talosheim from the demon barrens back to being broken-down ruins. Then the Oracle Child, Vandal, would be able to restore the buildings back to the Talosheim they all knew and loved.

“Show the Child what we can do!”

With the woodcutters in the lead, the giantlings defeated the territorial monsters one after the other, chopping down the trees as well.

Talosheim had been a city-state, completely cut off from the outside world by the Boundary Mountains until the discovery of the tunnel that led to Duke Heartner’s domain in the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom. The population had been around 5,000 in the city, with three villages of about 100. Apart from a few skilled adventurers like Sword King Borkz and the temple warriors led by Healing Saint Geena, the nation didn’t have its own dedicated soldiers or combat technicians. All military personnel, including security, also held down regular jobs. Miners and fishermen were all the nation needed.

Based on that information alone, it might have appeared that Talosheim lacked military might, regardless of the innate physical prowess and tough bodies of the giantling population. That could not, however, be farther from the truth.

The primary industries of Talosheim, apart from some agriculture, relied entirely upon the demon barrens and the dungeons. The woodcutters collected their timber from the ents, trents, and high trents of the demon barrens and dungeons. The fishermen used tridents to hunt water monsters. The miners sought veins of minerals located in the demon barrens and dungeons, meaning

they had to fight off any monsters getting in their way.

In short, every one of the 5,000 residents of Talosheim were, in fact, skilled combat professionals.

Even the farmers, who might have appeared to be an exemption from this, had the combat strength to beat down monsters coming for their crops with their bare hands. When Vandal learned of this, he and his friends were amazed that the Milg Shield Kingdom decided to pick a fight with this specific nation. After all, more than ninety percent of the population were capable of killing human soldiers with a single attack. Not to mention they lived in a massive fortress. Attempting to attack this nation would clearly lead to significant losses on their side.

Giantlings weren't especially adept with attributes, meaning they didn't have many magic users. But the forces of the Milg Shield Kingdom were also mainly comprised of knights and infantry, so they didn't have many Magicians either. The Amidd Empire, the ones behind the orders to the Milg Shield Kingdom, had probably not bothered to do any kind of in-depth analysis prior to ordering the attack. As a result, while on paper the Milg Shield Kingdom were the victors, they suffered historic losses, including a magical spear that was one of their national treasures.

It was all a bit ridiculous. But regardless of these past events, the giantling undead continued to wipe all the monsters out of Talosheim.

Around the same time, Vandal was reading in the ruins of the adventurers' guild. The libraries in the Temple of Vida and the small branch of the magicians' guild had been either burnt down or pillaged, but the collection here had been spared. That gave him a number of reading options, even 200 years later.

The books in the temple had been burned because, ostensibly, the reasons for the invasion were religious, and the books from the magicians' guild had been taken because they might have contained some kind of unique and useful research. The adventurers' guild was unconnected to either of those reasons, and so its library had been left alone. The attackers might also have simply been forced to retreat before they could do anything. In any case, one of the giantling undead had told Vandal that there should be a book on dhampir there.

As a side note, there had also been a magic item that issued the registration cards that adventurers' guild members carried, but Vandal couldn't get it to work. It seemed that only someone working for the guild could operate it. If he could somehow register, he might be able to obtain a title and skills, and even become an adventurer without revealing his MP. But life was not going to be quite that easy on him.

First things first, anyway. He needed to learn about his own race.

Now I can finally learn about myself, he thought. He hadn't known much until now, apart from being the child of the subordinate species vampire Varen and the dark elf Dalshia, and he had been looking for the opportunity to learn more.

First and foremost, he wanted some idea of average lifespan—how long he was going to live. That would help him to plan how to spend his future. If, for any reason, it was shorter than for humans, he needed to know ahead of time. He could use magic to extend his life, and use Rejuvenation on himself, but there was always the possibility that dhampir simply didn't age and then vanished on their 30th birthday. *Okay, that doesn't seem likely, but you never know*, Vandal mused. *At least I can read this.*

He breathed in the aroma of the aged paper while reading the text. First, he learned that a dhampir would directly inherit the powers of both of its parents.

This characteristic was especially strong if the non-vampire parent was also one of Vida's new races.

It sounds like I have some combat and bow abilities, then. Just like my parents.

He might have some aptitude with Dalshia's Bow Proficiency and Varen's Brawling Proficiency, for which he had apparently mainly used his claws. As for elemental magic, he didn't have any attribute aptitude and so he probably couldn't use that—unless an elemental suddenly appeared for the death magic, which hadn't existed until now. The Lemures were familiars that Vandal had created using his magical power, not spirits.

Hmmm, Vandal thought. Maybe this means I also get the resistance from the sun that my dad had? In that case, even if I use Suck Blood to become more of a vampire, I'll probably be okay.

The book stated that dhampirs were not born with the weaknesses of true vampires, but if they used Suck Blood repeatedly and moved closer to their vampiric parent, they could obtain further strength at the cost of also taking on their parent's weakness. However, Vandal's dad had been known for his resistance to sunlight. Furthermore, while subordinate species vampires had nothing of a vampire's strength other than their physical abilities, they also had no weaknesses other than sunlight. This meant Vandal could obtain vampiric strength without any risks.

Okay. I'm going to start drinking more blood, he decided. Every time they bled out a monster, he felt the desire to drink some of the blood. Now that he knew that there was not only no reason to hold back, but that it could also make him stronger, his hesitation was gone. His mother would also surely love it if he learned to fight with his claws, like his father.

What about lifespan? That was where he had wanted to start. *Let's see . . . it*

depends on the non-vampiric parent?

That was what the book said. Many things about dhampirs changed depending on their parents, and their lifespan was decided by the parent who wasn't a vampire.

If it was a human, with a lifespan of 100 years, the dhampir could expect to live for 300 to 500 years; if it was a dwarf, with a lifespan of 200 years, then the dhampir might live 600 to 1000; and for an elf, with a lifespan of 500 years, a dhampir might live 1500 to 2000 years. It looked like they would live three to five times the lifespan of the race of their non-vampire parent.

This was all the estimates of a sage who used life attribute magic to examine multiple dhampir at some point in the distant past, so it wasn't entirely trustworthy. But it did sound like he could expect a long life—so long as he didn't get killed.

How long do dark elves live for, anyway? he wondered. He would have asked Dalshia, but she was currently sleeping in her bone. He wandered around looking for a book on dark elves and fortunately, managed to find one. Perhaps a third of it had rotted away, but the information he wanted was intact.

"Dark elves were created by the Goddess Vida with the ardent desire for them to be stronger than the elves, and they are superior to elves in every aspect. That includes longevity, of course, and compared to the 500 years an elf may live, a dark elf may live 1000."

That meant Vandal could get at least 3000 years, and at best perhaps 5000. A true witness to history.

That's a long time. I can't comprehend it, Vandal muttered. Human concepts of time could barely cling to the edges of such a period. At least the fourth life

that Rodocolte had promised him seemed to be a long way in the future. *What was that god thinking, having me reborn as a dhampir? Although I suppose he cursed me, hoping I'd become depressed and kill myself. I doubt he was thinking about my potential lifespan.*

If he hadn't been able to use death attribute magic, he would have hit the wall the moment Dalshia was killed. Suicide wouldn't have been necessary; he would have simply starved.

The book also stated that most dhampir were killed before having the chance to pass away naturally. Given that, Vandal could perhaps see why he had been born as a dhampir.

Next, maybe there's a book about adventurers.

The branch of the adventurers' guild here in Talosheim had come from the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom adventurers' guild, meaning it operated similarly. The materials here were almost 200 years old, but there were many races, such as dwarves and giantlings, that lived for longer than that, meaning everything other than the minor details were probably the same. Something must have gone seriously wrong if the system underwent any serious changes in the past 200 years.

Here we go . . . and this looks pretty much the same as the Milg Shield Kingdom.

The system and restrictions didn't seem all that different from what he had heard from Kachia and the spirits of dead adventurers. Different country, same guild.

There were two differences: the treatment of Vida's new races and the training for adventurers. The Olbaum Electorate Kingdom adventurers' guild

treated some of the members of Vida's new races, like dark elves and giantlings, as humans. However, those that had been created through liaisons with monsters, such as lamia, scylla, arachne, majin, oni, and vampires, were in principle handled as monsters. Those were the races that often caused injury to humans, or that had a history of violent conflict with them. Still, some clans among them were more friendly and designated by the state as not to be harmed.

Hmmm. Looks like just being enemies with the Amidd Empire doesn't mean they handle Vida's new races in completely the opposite manner, Vandal mused.

That said, they had traded with Talosheim, so they couldn't be all that hard on the Goddess Vida. The relationships between the races may have changed in the past 200 years as well. These were the kinds of things he was going to have to ask about once he made it into human society.

Then, there's the adventurer training. I didn't expect to have to go back to school in another dimension. Unlike the Amidd Empire and its member nations, the guilds in the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom included educational facilities. This was because the nation had more adventurers, and more demon barrens and dungeons that required their attention.

Adventurers were still ultimately responsible for themselves. If a reckless party of fools got themselves wiped on a hopeless adventure, the country and the guild would bear no responsibility. Typical adventurers were either those with confidence in their skills, or those with no other choice—orphans, the young and unemployed, the third and fourth sons of farmers or merchants who had no hope of inheritance. To put it bluntly, society wasn't all that worse off if it lost a few of them.

That said, Vandal read that the guild had to deal with half of newly registered

adventurers dying within one year and most retiring prior to reaching beyond rank D. That didn't help with keeping up appearances, and the guild did require a certain number of skilled adventurers. If those with no choice didn't even choose becoming adventurers, they might choose something more damaging to the nation as a whole, such as a life of crime.

Furthermore, numbers were needed to keep down the occurrence of monsters in the demon barrens and dungeons. It was important to collect the precious monster materials and products, but also to prevent a horde of monsters from threatening the stability of the entire nation.

The state therefore provided the money to form an educational organization for adventurers. They intended to provide a certain level of knowledge and fighting strength to new adventurers in order to keep them alive for longer. The undertaking was a massive success, and the death rate of new adventures within their first year fell to less than a fifth of its all-time high. In addition, many more adventurers made it to rank D or higher. This also allowed the state to start hiring skilled adventurers as personal protection or resident Magicians. A good result all round.

Having read this, Vandal looked up.

Am I being unfair to think that this seems suspicious? he wondered. The death rate during the first year had dropped, but what about the second year? What did "significant increase" mean in terms of rank D adventurers? Why weren't there any specific numbers? *Well, whatever.* He didn't want to become an adventurer because of some ideal or dream. It was the easiest way to obtain a form of identification, and then continue what he had been doing already—hunting monsters and bandits—and this time, for money.

More than anything else, being an adventurer made it easier to earn fame

than any other profession. Vandal therefore ignored the other underground areas of the adventurers' guild and focused his attention on the guild's educational system.

The school ran on a credit system and could be attended for one to three years. If students obtained the minimum number of credits and the approval of the dean, they could graduate at any time. The only condition to attend was to register and pay the fees. There was also a student loan system, where students could pay after graduation with their income as an actual adventurer.

The most important information for Vandal, of course, pertained to the enrollment of minors.

"Minors are unable to progress higher than rank F unless they have graduated from the adventurers' academy," it read. The adventurers' guild divided adventurers up into eight ranks depending on their abilities and achievements. The bottom rank, G, was given to newbies who had just registered with the guild. They could only accept work in the town that didn't require combat—basically day laborers, and at worse pay than they would have gotten in Japan. Any jobs that might involve combat, even if it was going to pick herbs on the plains, required a rank of F or higher.

In other words, if I'm going to aim for the top, and want money and fame, as a minor I will need to enter the adventurers' academy.

As he was currently only about to turn three years old, Vandal was definitely a minor. He had decided to obtain the resurrection device beneath the castle and use it to bring Dalshia back to life, but he wasn't willing to spend ten years to do it. That meant he would still be a minor when he registered with the guild.

A school, he thought. Maybe I'll even enjoy it this time.

He wasn't confident in that.

When he had been a kid on Earth, his uncle had at least sent him for mandatory education. When it came to high school, his uncle told him not to try for anything other than a public school, and that he would have to find a job if he didn't get in. That put the pressure on him, but he passed the exams.

However, due to his situation at home, he hadn't been able to have friends over, and was too scared of his uncle to risk going to anyone else's house. The psychological trauma made him suspicious in general, so he hadn't even made any friends in the first place.

On top of that, the teachers hadn't really liked him, and while his grades were reasonable, he earned a reputation as a problem child. This situation remained unchanged into junior high, and by the time he was able to resist his uncle a little more during his high school days, he had himself given up on living a bright and cheerful school life.

He had to wonder if he would be able to make friends at school. He still had little confidence in his communication skills, outside of talking to undead and ghouls.

Having taken the spotlight as the user of a new form of magic, I become the kid at school everyone wants to be . . . nope, I can't see it. Indeed, all he could see was being pushed off into the corner and rejected even further. *Whatever. I don't mind being alone. I bet it's nothing special anyway. If it's a credit system, I can just get what I need and get out.*

Then he could tackle dungeons and earn money and fame with Sam and the others. He had plenty of friends already. He was a Ghoul King! He was a winner now, not a loser!

Raising these barriers in his heart, he closed the book. He really didn't want to go to school again.

He decided to try and blow off his darkening mood by going and having some fun with his skeletal undead. He returned his current book to its spot on the shelf, but another tome caught his eye.

"Observations on Undead?"

He pulled the book out and decided to spend a little more time reading.



When Vandal's handmade skeletal undead, including the human skeleton, weren't fighting anything, they tended to hang out around Sam, mucking about while doing some training. They would practice fighting amongst themselves, dodge stones thrown by Skeleton Monkey, or watch Skeleton Bird pulling off acrobatic feats in the air.

"Squeeee . . ."

One of them, the Skeleton, had started to get left behind by its fellows. It was the only one that was still rank 3. Vandal approached it now.

"I've found a way to that might make you stronger. I want to give it a try," Vandal said.

The skeleton squeaked in curiosity. It looked like a fine bone warrior, with a bow on its back, a sword at its hip, and wearing armor and a shield, but in fact it was possessed by the spirit of a mouse. That was why its Sword Proficiency and Shield Proficiency skills seemed to be stuck at level 1. It might also be the reason why it was still rank 3, even after reaching level 100. The book had

explained some things to Vandal, which he recalled now.

“There are numerous conditions for the creation of powerful undead. Among those, the most common is having a spirit that matches the body, or that has good compatibility with it.”

Here in Ramda, even if a body turned into undead, the spirit it contained was not always the spirit it had when it was alive. It could be a different person; it could be a completely different animal. And in those cases, it would remain a weak, rank 1 or rank 2 undead.

If the spirit of a human ended up in the corpse of a wild beast or monster, it wouldn't suddenly understand the nervous system and fighting instincts of its new body, meaning it would have its hands full simply operating the new skeleton. Even more so if the body had body parts that a human didn't, like a long tail, wings, or two heads. The same concept applied if an animal spirit was placed inside a human. It took a pretty clever animal to even be able to use the hands of a human skeleton, and a quadruped animal struggled with bipedal movement. Using any kind of tool was out of the question.

It was like transplanting a human brain into an animal, or an animal one into a human. When considered in that light, the mouse spirit that had ended up in the skeleton was quite incredible. A genius among mice, surely.

Mice could skillfully use their front paws, true, but this one handled a sword, shield, and even shot arrows. It was smarter than your average golem, at least.

Unfortunately, there were limits. As a spirit, maybe it could overcome those limits, given 100 years or so, but Vandal didn't want to wait that long. That had given Vandal an idea: what if he added additional human spirits to the skeleton, on top of the mouse-brained human body he already had? Maybe that would resolve this issue.

For his choice of spirits, he carefully selected the emptiest shells he could find, for which so long time had passed that no personality, emotions, or memories remained. Luckily enough, this was the site of an ancient battle, so it was easy to find candidates.

“Okay. I’m going to add another spirit,” Vandal said.

“Squee . . . squeak!”

The skeleton rapidly absorbed the spirit fragments, like a sponge absorbing water. The skeleton didn’t seem to be suffering; indeed, its jaw was clicking and blue eye flames flickering happily, so Vandal kept adding more.

“Grrrrrh?”

“Gaaaaah!”

Skeleton Wolf, Skeleton Bird, and the others all looked on in interest as the volume of spirits contained by the skeleton rapidly increased.

All of the sudden, it happened.

“Huh?!” Vandal gave a start.

It felt like something had clicked into place, like a spray of puzzles pieces he had been throwing into a box all suddenly clicked into place.

“Squeeeek . . . ah, master . . . master . . .” the skeleton said.

There were no beams of radiating light or terrible aura of power, nothing so flashy, and the skeleton looked exactly the same as before. But up until now, all it had done was squeak.

“Has it worked? Have you ranked up?” Vandal asked. Ranking up could greatly increase the intelligence of a monster. Adventurers often mistook this for simply earning experience as they leveled up and became smarter as a result,

but some suddenly gained access to magic or the ability to speak.

This was especially true for undead. Ranking up helped the soul of the undead acclimatize to its new body and allowed them to recall their memories and techniques.

“Yes, my master,” the mousy skeleton replied with a nod. “You have allowed me to squeak-reach rank 4, Skeleton Knight.” His voice was a gravelly baritone that probably had some heft behind it if he got angry. The intermittent squeaking might be an issue, but Vandal could overlook it.

Still, he wondered where this tone of voice was coming from. It sounded quite refined. Maybe the spirit body fragments included a knight from the Milg Shield Kingdom forces. Vandal had tried to pick completely empty spirits that wouldn’t bring any anger or hatred along with them, but maybe fusing with the skeleton had brought back some unwanted memories. The resulting undead was clearly under the effects of Death Attribute Allure, but if it was going to start playing the Milg Shield Kingdom knight, it might lead to trouble with Borkz and the other Talosheim giantling undead.

“Tell me. Have you remembered anything from your past life?” Vandal asked.

“Yes. I have,” the skeleton replied with a nod. “I was returning with food for my family when I was suddenly attacked. I had no recourse and was tossed around, toyed with, but then left without being finished off. He had already been full after eating my family. Killing me had been nothing but sport. Gah, that evil cat! Squeeeek!”

Vandal paused. “Cats will do that to you,” he finally said. Evidently humans weren’t the only ones who killed without the need.

In any case, it looked like only his way of speaking had been affected, and he

didn't seem to have any memories of the Milg Shield Kingdom. No problems there.

But Vandal liked both cats and dogs and wanted a pet in the future. "No killing cats without good cause," he said.

"Yes, master," the skeleton replied.

He seemed obedient, which was good. A future in which the cats of the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom faced extinction had just been avoided. Vandal didn't know if they had housecats on Ramda or not anyway.

It was already late. Vandal spent the rest of the day hanging out with the skeletons. Skeleton Wolf and Skeleton Bear tussled over a monster bone that Vandal tossed out for them. He took a flight suspended in the claws of Skeleton Bird, and he let Skeleton Monkey groom his hair. It was all a lot of fun.

"Squeeeeek!" Rita and Saria returned from hunting to see the skeleton running at full strength, potentially tilting their heads at the strange sight—it was hard to tell, as they didn't physically have heads.

Young master, what is the skeleton running for . . . like that? Rita asked.

It's not going to train it, is it? Saria said. The skeleton had no lung functions to improve by running.

"Just something I threw together on a whim," Vandal replied.

Why? Rita asked.

"I think the mouse spirit in the skeleton has some hamster proclivities," Vandal commented.

Ham . . . what? A type of meat?

The skeleton continued to run happily for a while longer in the wheel that

Vandal had created from wood using Golem Creation.

Name: Skeleton

Rank: 4

Race: Skeleton Knight

Level: 1

—Passive Skills

[Night Vision] [Brute Strength: Level 2] [Enhanced Loyalty: Level 1 (NEW!)]
[Spirit Body: Level 1 (NEW!)]

—Active Skills

[Sword Proficiency: Level 2 (UP!)] [Shield Proficiency: Level 2 (UP!)] [Bow Proficiency: Level 2 (UP!)]

[Sneaking Steps: Level 1] [Cooperation: Level 1] [Command: Level 1 (NEW!)]



The looming mountainsides to the east and west of the City of the Sun Talosheim had mercury mirrors created by secret alchemy techniques left by Hero Zakkato. These mirrors, created from a mercury-like liquid metal, reflected the sunlight toward the ground, providing Talosheim with the same period of sunlight as a city out on a flat plain.

They had grown a long, thin rice-like plant that could be harvested three times a year (like indica rice on Earth), filling the large stomachs of the hungry population. Half the kingdom was covered with demon barrens, but that also allowed crops to grow quickly, and they produced three times as much food as other lands.

However, the fighting with the Milg Shield Kingdom had turned the fields into the homes of wandering monsters, and the mercury mirrors were completely destroyed.

Putting that sad history aside, Vandal was in the midst of his forced recuperation. Today, he was mainly making things.

The black goblins, anubis, and orcas children gathered to see what he was doing.

“King. What are you making?”

It had only been a few months since they were born, but all of them were already bigger than Vandal. He knew that monsters grew at a faster pace than normal, but it was still a sight to see. Even more amazingly, he heard that the growth of the black goblins was actually slower than their progenitor species, regular goblins.

“A weapon?” one of them asked.

“No, Braga,” Vandal said. He had used Golem Creation to form a circular piece of wood, which the black goblin kid seemed to think was a throwing weapon.

“Okay. A plate.” This came from Zamed, a dog-faced anubis boy.

“For carrying things. Better than the leaves Mom uses,” suggested Gobba, an orcas who was already the size of a grown human.

Both of them were wrong too.

“Tell us what it is,” said Memedigga, Zamed’s twin sister.

“A toy,” Vandal finally replied.

“A toy?”

His friends were all puzzled by this reply. Vandal made some final adjustments to the balance of the wooden disc, finally happy with it. Then he applied something from the content of the barrel at his side, making a rubber golem around the edge to make sure it wouldn’t hurt anyone when thrown. It was still a bit rough, but that should do it.

“Yes. A toy called a frisbee,” Vandal said.

Vandal had been tossing bones around playing with Skeleton Wolf when he thought how much more fun it would be if he had a frisbee like on Earth.

Ramda didn’t have many forms of entertainment like sports and toys. They did have national tournaments for athletics and combat sports, and they had toys like dolls and stuffed animals. What they didn’t have were things like frisbees and balls. Maybe he could find something like them if he searched more thoroughly, but he decided to make one for himself instead. They had plenty of wood he could use, and even some rubber trees that allowed him to make a golem from some natural rubber to provide slip prevention and shock resistance.

“You throw this frisbee—” Vandal started.

“And smash them together? The one that breaks is the loser?” one suggested.

“. . . You throw it to each other, catch it, and repeat. It’s for playing,” Vandal explained.

Considering that violent suggestion, Vandal wondered if maybe he should have made a ball first, but he hated balls and didn't really want to make one. Having had no friends at school, lessons involving the use of balls had brought him nothing but pain, or opportunities for the more popular kids to show off.

"I'll give you a demo. Try throwing it," Vandal said.

Basdia returned that day from a session of combined training and monster culling and wanted to say hello to Vandal. She happened to show up at that moment.

"Van?" she asked.

Vandal was chasing a small disk flying through the air. After he caught it, he proceeded to throw it toward another of the new breed gagging around him.

"Is this some kind of training?" Basdia asked. "No—a game. You really are just relaxing?"

Basdia chose to stop for a moment and observe. Just watching, however, she had no idea what made it fun.

"Take this, King!" The orcas boy holding the disc launched another throw by swinging his arm in a powerful arc. He had the Brute Strength skill, propelling the disc fast and high into the air.

"He won't get that one—" Basdia started, thinking Vandal had no chance. But Vandal dashed to a nearby ruined wall, and then used his arms and legs to scramble right up it like a quadruped beast. For a moment she thought he was using magic, but then she realized he was using his claws.

"He's slight but has strength and is more agile than even he knows. The perfect man to bear my second child, that's for sure," Basdia said happily,

nodding to herself as she looked Vandal over again. Then she moved on, deciding not to interrupt the game. She could talk to him later.

The frisbee became quite the hot item among the ghouls, black goblins, and especially the anubis. The giantling undead and orcas, however, were not so bothered.



Talosheim was currently receiving a large volume of materials.

More than ninety percent of them came from the giantling undead at work, led by Borkz, as they cleared out the monsters from the demon barrens around Talosheim. There brought piles of monster meat and materials, along with timber, herbs, plants, and Talosheim resources that had either been left behind or unnoticed by the Milg Shield Kingdom. These materials increased at a rate far faster than they could be put to good use, and the majority of them were simply piling up after Vandal used Maintain Freshness on them.

One thing they had found a lot of was Olbaum Electorate Kingdom currency from 200 years ago. There were copper and silver coins of varying sizes, many of which they really didn't have any use for. Anything with value of gold or more had probably been carried out by the Milg Shield Kingdom forces, while they hadn't bothered with the hassle of the silver coins or lower. If they polished the coins up and took them to the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom, they could probably still use them as currency, excepting the really damaged ones. The currency might have changed in the past 200 years, but at the least they would still be worth their weight in copper and silver. Maybe they would even fetch a premium price among people such as coin collectors, if such people

existed. For now, however, Vandal had no way to use them.

“What can we do with these?” Vandal pondered.

“Nothing much. Just put them in storage until you go to the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom, Lord Van?” Talea said, receiving a back massage from Vandal as she spoke. She had visited the Job Change Chamber and managed to return to her previous job, Armaments Craftsman. “They rarely update their currency, so it should still pass muster—but then I don’t know much about the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom. You should ask Kachia or one of them . . . ah, right there, harder . . .”

“I could do. We’re talking about countries at war here, always fighting,” Vandal replied.

Neighboring countries would normally have some exchange, but the domain of Viscount Valchez where Kachia and the others had been active as humans hadn’t been on the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom border. Even in the places the countries did border each other, there was almost no exchange, apart from a few merchants.

These countries had been enemies from the time of their founding. The vicious fighting a few years before had greatly whittled down the territory of the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom’s dukes, meaning there was little love between them and no incentive for trade.

And yet the wheels kept turning. The Amidd Empire commanded a third of the Vangaia Continent, and around half of the land that was inhabitable by humans. It also maintained solid trade with nearby island nations and other continents. They had no particular economic issues or trouble feeding their people.

Vandal didn't know so much about the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom, but he presumed they didn't have significant problems. Each of the territories commanded by a duke in Olbaum had started out as its own small country, and they surely had their own trade routes outside the continent.

In light of all that, Vandal decided it might not be worth it to take the coins he had taken from the bandits around Evbejia into Olbaum to convert. It felt like a waste, but it was better off to melt them into gold.

"I'll ask Datara to do it," he said. Datara was a giantling undead who had been a blacksmith. He had spent the last 200 years swinging his hammer—and doing nothing else. Just standing there swinging it.

After meeting Vandal, he had recovered some of his faculties and memories of his life, and he was now working hard to restore his forge. Many of the tools he required had not survived the intervening centuries, so he was remaking them from scratch.

"That's a good idea," Talea said, listening to Vandal's plan. "I can't handle gold yet anyway."

Talea was an excellent Armaments Craftsman with a high skill level, but she still struggled with gold. In Ramda, the Armaments Craftsman job indicated people who mainly handled monster materials to make armor and weapons. Unlike the Earth-style image of blacksmiths and weapon makers crafting swords and katana from metal, they rarely handled metals. They might use mithril powder or orichalcum fragments as a media of some kind, or metal fasteners, but that was about it.

Blacksmith, meanwhile, was the job that worked in metals, such as copper, bronze, steel, adamantite, mithril, and orichalcum, and used monster materials as accessories. The skills and tools used by these two professions were also very

different.

Talea in particular had continued to hone her skills in the jungle demon barrens after being turned into a ghoul, a place where there wasn't much in the way of metallic resources. She hadn't handled metal for 210 years.

"If I had the tools, I could probably handle just melting it all down for you. But I see no reason not to go to the specialist, if you have one available," she said.

"Indeed. Datara would probably take offense if I didn't ask him anyway," Vandal added.

Datara was a tough and grouchy old goat. If he found out that Vandal had asked Talea to handle metalwork instead of him, Vandal would never hear the end of it—quite literally, what with him being an emotionally unstable undead. Datara also looked like he would be super scary if he got mad.

"I'm sorry for the trouble, anyway," Talea apologized. "Hnnnh . . . getting so carried away . . . I threw out my back . . ." Talea was 264 years old, belying her appearance of under 20, and she was out of commission due to hurting her back.

The Job Change Chamber was up and running in the adventurers' guild, so all the ghouls, including Talea, had taken jobs. These jobs were said to be blessings from the gods, given to humans in the time before the Demon King appeared. That meant monsters could change jobs, even undead like Sam and Nuaza.

Ghouls were one of the new races created by Vida, just like the vampires. But they were half monster and half human, so they could very much change jobs. The fact that Talea and Kachia retained all the status and skill modifiers from the jobs they had held as humans was further proof of that.

The ghouls had lived in the demon barrens all their lives, unable to use

facilities located in human towns and unable to create such technology for themselves. Finally gaining access, they proceeded to use the Job Change Chamber one after the other. When Talea's family had sold her, she had been forced to take the job of Prostitute. She had been at level 100 in that for centuries, but now she managed to change back to her original job, Armament Craftsman.

"Now I can finally fulfill my dreams from when I was human and become an Expert! Even a Master!" Talea had said happily.

On Earth, these might simply be names given to people who distinguished themselves, but on Ramda they were the higher classes of job within the Craftsman Job Tree. Once achieved, they would display in the format of "Master: Armament Craftsman." She had therefore been seeking experience to raise her level, eagerly working with new materials from Raptors and Flying Sharks, but ended up pushing herself too hard.

"I understand how you feel," Vandal said. He could relate to not being able to change jobs.

Vandal had just used death attribute magic to numb the pain in Talea's back. He then used Spirit Bodification on part of his own body to place it inside Talea and loosen her tight muscles. If he had been able to do this on Earth, he could have charged a fortune for it. *Spirit body massage, guaranteed to relax you better than a low frequency massage!* Well, that might have been going too far.

As he relaxed her muscles, he also did a quick health check. No problems and no sign of her organ function failing. She gasped, and Vandal thought for a moment she realized what he was doing.

"I just had a thought," she said. "Can you use Golem Creation to control metal, Lord Van? I know there are golems made of copper, steel, and mithril."

Nope, she hadn't noticed. He wasn't doing anything wrong, not really, but he was pleased she hadn't detected him.

"Yes, I can do that," Vandal answered. "It requires more MP than working with stone. I haven't had a chance to try it with mithril, but I bet I could." Vandal was the same as the ghouls, unable to participate in human society, with few opportunities to interact with metals. He tried it out with steel and had managed to make a palm-sized golem, no problem.

"But I still can't do anything other than roughly change the shape. I've made dugout homes, repaired stone houses, and I can bend a bent steel pipe back into shape, but . . . well, take a look."

He used Golem Creation to control some of the bronze coins, turning them into the shape of sword.

"I see. Yes, this is no good at all."

Talea could tell with just a glance that the bronze sword was worthless as a weapon. After all, it was just a lump of bronze that happened to be shaped like a sword. It had no cutting edge along the blade and wouldn't be able to trim a twig from a bush.

"That's about it. I've got no hope of making statues from stone or earth that look like people or implement any sort of fine details." He tried to make some earth and stone golems that looked like Talea. They ended up with a female form, but their faces were crude and details such as their fingers were rough and unpolished.

He couldn't create such details with Golem Creation at the moment. In terms of construction work, he could make simple dugout homes, but not the kind of complex, multi-story structures they had built on Earth.

The best he could do in terms of weapons was to melt the metal and pour it into a mold. That might work, but someone would have to make the mold for him. In order to achieve such tasks, he would need other skills alongside Golem Creation, such as Blacksmith Craftsman and Carpentry. Fortunately, making the dugouts using Golem Creation had earned him the Carpentry skill. In other words, he used Carpentry techniques, which gave him enough experience to earn the skill.

“I can remove the impurities from metal,” Vandal said. “That’s something. Like this.”

The bronze sword shuddered and then specks started to fall out of it. The sword then started to sparkle, almost as if it were a completely different substance.

“This is bronze?!” Talea exclaimed. “It’s glittering like a gemstone! Lord Van, this is amazing. If you can increase the purity of bronze like this, and can do the same thing with steel, then this is something everyone in the world will want!”

Achieving 100 percent purity would be impossible using Ramda technology. Even high-level earth attribute Magicians rarely achieved such a feat. Historically, there had been some who had managed to create completely pure metals, but only in small quantities, and not enough for industrial purposes. If Vandal could make pure steel, he would be able to stand alongside such historical figures—indeed, even surpass them. But Vandal didn’t seem all that impressed with himself.

“Maybe, but doing this really tires me out,” he explained.

“Ah. It uses a lot of MP,” Talea said.

“No. It just makes my head tired,” Vandal replied. He proceeded to press his

forehead into Talea's back.

She gasped at how hot it was. "Lord Van, you are almost burning me!"

"They call this magic fever, so I'm told," Vandal said. "It happens if you try to pull off complex magic beyond your current Intellect."

The Intellect stat was involved with the volume and speed of controlling and processing magic and battle tech. Exceeding its limits was like a computer overheating.

Making pure bronze using Golem Creation, as he had just shown Talea, didn't take that much MP. That might not be true for other Magicians, but Vandal had more than 100 million MP, so it was a small amount for him.

And all he was really doing was middle-school science. He kept the copper atoms and kicked anything else out, and if they oxidized, he returned them to normal. It felt pretty simple. The reason that earth Magicians hadn't been able to increase the purity of metals was likely just because they didn't understand the atomic structure. This was a fantasy world, without such things as electron microscopes. How could they know?

Still, while Vandal was aware of the concept of atoms, simply turning a few pounds of bronze into pure metal had given him a temperature that almost knocked him right out. The technique was a difficult one, even for him.

Or maybe my Intellect is just too low. I might be able to work out some way around this . . . ah, Talea's back feels so good!

He placed some Whisp Fire around himself in order to steal away his fever as he pressed his forehead into Talea's back, where he noticed something.

"Hey, Talea, I just realized something about your body . . ." he started.

"Yes? Whatever did you realize?"

“Your biceps are massive. And so muscular,” Vandal said.

“That’s what you’re looking at?!” she exclaimed. “There are more interesting parts of me than that, surely? You can let your hands slip a little, Lord Van, I won’t mind!”

“Other parts . . . like your back? It’s really muscular too.”

She didn’t swing a hammer like a Blacksmith Craftsman, but an Armaments Craftsman still used a lot of strength in their work. Talea had more muscles on her arms and back than he expected. She often wore clothing that hid those parts of her, as well as accessories for the same purpose, so not many people noticed.

“No! Please, why are you only looking at those places?!” Talea covered her face and trembled, but Vandal thought he had been complimenting her. After all, he loved muscles. Muscles were justice, muscles were beauty, muscles were life. Even if one didn’t take it quite that far, surely a toned body was always attractive.

“I think I’ve had enough of your massage—uhgggh?!” Talea complained, but she shouldn’t have been wriggling around with Vandal still on her. Her back made another nasty sound.

“Nothing wrong with the bones. You just threw your back out,” Vandal reported. “An attack in the back, so to speak.”

Talea had stopped moving completely, and Vandal applied the magic again to numb her pain and then drew the heat away from the injured area. Back pain was clearly no joke, to say that Ghouls had the Resist Pain skill and she still almost passed out from it.

This was also the first time that “attack in the back” had been used in Ramda.

No one could have known it at this time, but this terrible wordplay would go on, in the fullness of time, to spread from Talosheim across the entire continent.

“Boy, there you are,” said Zadilis, entering the room. “Who is that with you?”

“Talea. She’s hurt her back and can’t move,” Vandal replied. Evening was falling on Talosheim when Zadilis appeared, looking pretty full of beans.

“Her back? Like an old crone!” Zadilis chuckled.

“Gaaah! You’re thirty years older than me! You should get an attack in the back too!” Talea raged.

“That does sound unpleasant,” Zadilis said, managing a little sympathy.

Vandal numbed the pain with his magic but the injury itself wasn’t cured yet. Talea was meekly accepting his treatment.

Zadilis looked more closely at that and saw that Vandal’s arms had merged into Talea’s waist.

“. . . What are you doing?” she asked.

“It’s a form of treatment using Spirit Body,” Vandal replied. “If I use Spirit Bodification and merge my body with her like this, I can also use my Rapid Healing skill on Talea. I can’t use healing magic myself, but I finally worked out this method.”

Talea cackled. “Are you jealous? Look at me, becoming one with Lord Van . . . no, stop it! Quit it, you fake pubescaaaaagh!” Zadilis shook her, eliciting screams.

“Respect your elders,” Zadilis replied. Her face turned more serious as she looked at Vandal.

“Is she dying?” she asked.

“No, I think she’s just old,” Vandal responded. “I don’t see the shadow of death on her. She should be fine, so long as she doesn’t overdo it.”

“... I think she probably will. Overdo it, I mean.”

“Me too. I’ll bring up the subject of Rejuvenation sometime soon,” Vandal replied.

There might be nothing more than her lifestyle that led to these back injuries, but it was also surely a sign of aging. He might have been overthinking things, but it would be better to restore her youth and vitality before the specter of death was truly upon her.

“How is your training going, anyway?” Vandal asked.

“Very well. I reached level 100, so I’ll be performing a Job Change tomorrow,” Zadilis reported.

The ghouls who had performed a Job Change started by becoming apprentice jobs. There were many forms of Apprentice, including Apprentice Warrior, Apprentice Magician, Apprentice Weapons Craftsman, and Apprentice Maid. As the name suggests, the modifiers these jobs provided to stats and skills were not very powerful. However, they did offer modifiers across a wide range of skills, allowing those holding the job to earn experience and acquire skills while considering whether it was best suited to them. Zadilis and the other ghouls had maxed out their apprentice jobs in just a few days, but this was the exception rather than the norm.

When a human started an apprentice job, they were barely stronger than any ordinary person. They still had to learn to use weapons, working first with wooden swords and spears. Then they had to fight mock battles, and then rank 1 goblins, big frogs, and living bones with an instructor present, all to earn

experience.

The ghouls, however, were already rank 3 or higher. They were strong and had a number of combat skills. That meant they could hunt monsters like the needle wolves, which would have slaughtered a human Apprentice Warrior in seconds flat, and obtain large volumes of experience.

Zadilis had been fighting alongside the other ghouls to defeat monsters like flying sharks and raptors and had already hit level 100 as an Apprentice Magician. Her level as monster, however, had not risen. It seemed that job experience and monster experience were two separate things.

“I’m sure you want to test it for yourself as well, boy, but you must continue to take it easy,” Zadilis told him. “By the time Talea’s back has been cured, it will be your birthday, and the end of our agreement.”

“I still don’t know if it will work out,” Vandal said. He had the curse “unable to enter existing jobs,” meaning he wouldn’t be able to change to any jobs that already existed in Ramda. He still wanted to give it a try, but he was half-convinced it wouldn’t work. But if that was the case, he would just focus on building up the strength of the undead and ghouls.

“Noo! Lord Van, is my back really that bad?”

Talea had heard his last comment but, as she didn’t know about his cursed situation, she had thought he was talking about her own situation. It took a while to settle her back down.



Vandal’s birthday arrived. Saria and Rita showed up with a leather bag and

blindfold between them.

Young master! No questions, just put this bag on your head! Rita told him.

Don't forget the blindfold and earplugs, Saria said.

Vandal was a little taken aback. He had thought maybe he had been facing an uprising, but instead it was some kind of surprise. Hearing that, he excitedly put on the blindfold and then the bag. The scene looked more like a child abduction than anything else.

It wasn't long before voices crowded around him.

"There you are! I worked hard on this I'll have you know!"

"Me too! I hunted too!"

"He hasn't even seen them yet! Stop competing!"

It was noisy for a while. It sounded like they had something much bigger than he had been expecting, which made his heart soar.

The bag and the blindfold were removed.

"Happy birthday!" came a chorus of shouts.

They were in the grand hall, built to host cultural exchanges, parties, and balls with human society after the trading with the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom started. It was spacious—and that space was filled with Borkz, Vigaro, Zadilis, Nuaza, Basdia, Talea, and many others. The hall must have been quite the sight, back in the day, but it was a shell of its former self now. As though to replace the decorations of old, numerous skeletons covered in colorful feathers and scales filled the hall.

"Ah! Dinosaurs!" Vandal exclaimed. He didn't know the proper names of them here, and they were clearly different in numerous ways from the

dinosaurs that once roamed the Earth, but they sure did look like them at a glance.

One corpse looked like a Tyrannosaurus, with huge fangs in its jaws. Another looked like a Pteranodon, immediately identifiable as neither bat nor bird. There was a Triceratops-like one with large horns, and a Stegosaurus-like one with a boney plate on its back and spines on its tail.

The skeletons weren't completely intact, with chipped horns and stitched bellies on display, but they all looked comparatively fresh.

"These are our gift to you," Basdia said. "Mom told us how you wanted some scaly monsters that weren't dragons. There were a lot of them in the dungeons, too. This is after the blood and organs have been removed, to stop them from rotting."

So Zadilis had informed everyone about Vandal's interest in dinosaurs. As none of them were truly familiar with the type of animal in question, there was also a large crocodile monster, a snake, a fanged cat-like creature with scales across its body, and some other weird stuff mixed in. But none of that diminished what Vandal was feeling.

"Everyone . . . thank you . . ." The corner of his eyes felt hot. Even with the blood was drained and organs removed, it wasn't easy to get intact monster skeletons back to the city. The Cursed Carriages he had created when they crossed the Boundary Mountains had probably helped out, but it still had to have been very difficult.



Vandal . . . Dalshia appeared from the bone that Saria was carrying. I thought we were finished so many times. After your dad died. After I was captured. But you've made it to three years old. Thank you so much. I hope you'll only get bigger and stronger!

Vandal had cried so many times in his lives, he didn't even want to try and count the number. Anger, regret, sadness, self-pity, pain, hatred, suffering, rage, disgust, resentment. This, however, might be the first time he had cried for joy. It felt good, too.

"Thank you, Mom," he said. "Thank you, everyone. I know I'm going to rely on you going forward."

He wanted to live. He wanted to bring back his mom. The tears he would cry when he achieved that would surely feel even better. He wasn't going to get killed. He wasn't going to die. He would kill anyone who stood in his way—and turn them into fresh allies.

The Death Mage

CHAPTER THREE

FIRST JOB AND CONTINUED PURSUIT

Chapter Three: First Job and Continued Pursuit

There might not have been a birthday cake, but Vandal had no problem enjoying his birthday party. He dined on delicious skewers of T-rex and Triceratops meat. Everyone else enjoyed some 200-year-old Talosheim wine, while Vandal drank dinosaur blood. Then he turned his dino-corpse gifts into zombies and put on a live dinosaur show.

Vandal had asked Dalshia and the former adventurer Kachia about the topic of cakes, but it seemed what he was envisaging didn't exist yet on Ramda. They had milk but not cream, and bread but not fluffy sponge cake. A "cake" in Ramda involved bread made from flour drenched in butter, sugar, jam, and honey. He hoped to be able to make a whipped-cream cake to surprise everyone on his next birthday, but he would need to solve the wheat and milk problems first.

He wondered if dungeon treasure chests or troves could include wheat seeds or jars of milk. Talosheim hadn't kept livestock like cows or horses—the giantlings got their meat from hunting monsters, and the giantlings themselves were stronger than cattle when it came to working the land. They had kept a bird-like monster called a geega, something like a chicken. They were about the size of giantling children—so slightly smaller than a grown human—and laid one egg per day. They also had sharp beaks and claws and ate meat. At rank 2, however, they weren't all that strong.

"When I was alive," Borkz laughed, "I cracked a geega egg into a tumbler and drank it down every morning."

The eggs were comparable to ostrich eggs from Earth. All the geega they had

kept had been killed or escaped after the fighting, but they could still be found in the demon barrens and dungeons. Vandal planned to capture some and begin raising them again. Luckily, they had plenty of meat to feed them.

Hold on, Vandal thought. What was I thinking about? Right, the cake. We need the eggs for the cake. And then—

“Child, is something the matter? You have been pacing in front of the door for a while now,” Nuaza said, approaching him.

Vandal was in the adventurers’ guild, trying to avoid the reality of entering the room in which the Job Change ceremony would be performed. Nuaza’s question dragged him back to the present.

“No, nothing of note. I was just thinking a little about the future.”

“I see. That is a good thing. But aren’t you going to Job Change today?” Nuaza prompted.

“I still don’t feel quite ready, to be honest,” Vandal said.

The Job Change ritual didn’t require anything. When the adventurers’ guild was operating normally, you would pay the guild a fee, and once it was finished, you presented your guild card to be updated. Here, all you needed to do was enter the room and place your hand on the crystal ball inside the magic circle. Then you selected your desired job from among those displayed in your head. That was all. No need to register with a job website, fill out forms, write a CV, or take an interview. It wasn’t that kind of “job” you were changing, of course, so the lack of requirements made sense.

“I know they say the job is carved into your soul, but that’s just a figure of speech. It doesn’t hurt,” Nuaza assured him. He seemed to have got the wrong

end of the stick regarding the reasons for Vandal's tension. Nuaza did have a smile on his face—at least, it was probably intended as a smile. To Vandal, it looked like a lot of stretched skin.

Vandal had no right complain about people's facial expressions to begin with. Pacing around in front of this door wasn't getting him anywhere either.

"Okay," he finally said. "I'm going in."

Nuaza opened the door for him, and he stepped inside.

There was a magic circle drawn on the floor of the room, and a crystal ball stood on a plinth in the center. That was it.

The ball was glowing softly.

"Will it even show me any jobs?" Vandal wondered. He used Flight to float up into the air and reached out for the crystal ball. A little levitation was the only way he could reach the thing, which was placed at giantling height. Vigaro had his long male ghoulish arms and Basdia, though female, was plenty tall, but he wondered how Zadilis had reached it. Maybe she used some wind magic to fly up. Now he was wasting time again.

When he finally touched it, text appeared inside his brain, just like opening his status.

<Selectable Jobs: Death Mage, Golem Creator>

"Wow! Jobs!"

Vandal was so surprised at this result, that a Job Change was even possible, that his magic spluttered out and he dropped to the floor. He flipped over

reflexively and ended up smacking the back of his head, causing a Detect Danger: Death warning to pop up. Toddlers didn't have the sturdiest of skulls.

"Child, I heard a noise—Child?! Are you okay?!" Nuaza rushed in while Vandal remained lying on the floor, waiting for his Rapid Healing skills and non-attribute Enhanced Healing magic to heal himself. Nuaza's reacted like the first person to find a murder victim, and he dashed over to Vandal's side, but the child remained on the ground while signaling that he was okay. After a blow to the head, he didn't want to be moved until he was all healed up.

After everything he had come through, the trials he had faced and survived, and his vow to live made on his third birthday only yesterday, Vandal had come close to the utterly pathetic "death by hitting his head in surprise." But he had survived that too.

He flew back up and touched the crystal again.

<Selectable Jobs: Death Mage, Golem Creator>

There they were again. He had thought the curse might make it hard for him to change jobs, but he had two choices. That should have been something to be grateful for, but—

"Maybe it's some kind of trap?" he pondered aloud. He kept his internal happiness to himself and maintained a cool head. Rodocolte had cursed him with "unable to enter existing jobs," hoping to cause him to despair, give up on his revenge, and kill himself. It seemed strange that he could get a job so easily. *Why can I even change job anyway? It's the same with 'unable to personally acquire experience.'* If he wanted to really leave me no choice, he should have

gone with 'cannot level up' or 'unable to change jobs.' Why the weak ass curses?

Those curses were loophole free, and would have meant he could never take a job, just like a monkey couldn't sprout wings and fly. Given that Rodocolte didn't do that, all of this might be some cunning trap. For example, if he selected one of the displayed jobs, it would lead him to a terrible dead end. Maybe the modifiers were low, and the Passive Skills nothing but inconvenient. Skills like Short Life and Bad Luck, although he didn't know if such skills existed. Skills learned in this world could never be directly sealed once they were obtained, so learning a negative skill could be a big problem.

The bigger question was whether Rodocolte was capable of such a skillful trap. This was a god who had half-assed his resurrection plan and then left everything up to the reborn. He was only the Reincarnation God, after all—not a supreme, all-knowing being.

Here in Ramda, humans had levels and could take jobs. To put it the other way around, if you didn't have a level or a job, you weren't human. Rodocolte had set things up so that the resurrected, including Vandal, would be reborn here on Ramda after they died on Origin. Being born as a human on Ramda meant having a level and job. Perhaps he couldn't have made an exception to those rules.

That might explain why he had selected "unable to personally acquire experience" and "unable to enter existing jobs." Since even a god couldn't ignore certain rules of existence, the curse were full of holes, and Vandal found one to drive through.

On top of it all, Rodocolte didn't exist here on Ramda. He was responsible for the reincarnation of the dead, but his name didn't appear once in the local

mythology. That suggested he was watching Ramda from afar and not all that knowledgeable about the details on the ground.

“In other words—Rodocolte half-asses everything and knows nothing, and that’s why I found this loophole,” Vandal murmured.

He sometimes had flashes of suspicion, but he came back to the conclusion that even gods weren’t perfect.

Vandal’s next concern was that it seemed odd these jobs appeared for him—jobs that no one anywhere else had ever done—without him doing any particular training to achieve them. Only a little thought evaporated these doubts, though.

My death attribute magic is a magic that never existed on Ramda before. It makes sense that a job would appear that hasn’t existed either.

The gods had created the job system, but they didn’t create all the jobs. The system had been in place for hundreds of thousands of years, after all. If there hadn’t been the nobility system in the time of the gods, then jobs like Knight and Holy Knight wouldn’t have existed at first either. And in the future, if someone here (probably one of the incoming resurrected) invented gunpowder and firearms, jobs like Rifleman and Gunman would probably also appear.

Vandal was surprised to learn that the Golem Creation skill was seemingly a first for this world. He had to wonder how golems were normally made here. He didn’t know much about golems on Ramda and shook his head for a moment. He would have to look that up later.

First things first. I need to pick one of these two. Death Mage or Golem Creator.

Neither one had “Apprentice” in front of it, meaning they had to be pretty

high-level Jobs. That meant the modifiers he obtained would be big, but it would also probably be a number of months, if not a year before he could Job Change again.

He could presume that Death Mage, as the name suggested, placed the emphasis on death attribute magic. There were similar job titles that attached the attribute name to “Magician” or “Mage.” Such jobs provided large stat modifier bonuses to MP and Intellect, and not much to anything else. Strength, in particular, got almost nothing. The skill modifiers could be considered large for the attribute in question, medium for general magic skills like Magic Control, and then small for skills related to other attributes. On the other hand, these mage jobs had a hard time learning any weapon or fighting skills.

If that was how Death Mage would also work, then it was a little niche, but also the right job if he wanted to continue to improve his death attribute magic. It would take time for him to raise any skills other than magic, however.

For Golem Creator, he had no point of reference from similar jobs, so he had no idea what it might entail. It sounded like the modifiers would apply to Golem Creation skills. He had no idea what stat modifiers he might receive. Perhaps Intellect. But he had already made good use of the Golem Creation skill in its current format. He could happily keep using it, without change, for the next decade—indeed, the next century.

At first, Vandal kicked the tires on it, as he always did, but in the end it wasn’t much of a choice. His current goal was to defeat the half-destroyed dragon golem in the castle basement and obtain the resurrection device. Death magic was going to make a larger contribution for combat, so he opted to raise that first. He was also looking to finally obtain Alchemy. Plus, Golem Creation was a skill that branched from death attribute magic to begin with, so even as a Death

Mage he might get some modifiers that benefitted golem creation.

“ . . . Select Death Mage.”

After he selected the Job, the Golem Creator text in his mind vanished while the Death Mage text became larger. His chest suddenly felt warm.

“This is . . . better than I could have hoped for,” Vandal murmured, unable to contain his surprise as power flowed into him. In particular, his head felt incredibly clear, like his brain cells had been powered up.

The level of Death Attribute Magic, Non-Attribute Magic, Skip Incantation, Magic Control, and Spirit Body skills have increased!

Acquired Alchemy and Magical Power Auto Recovery skills!

Further announcements in his head indicated a large chunk of skills all leveled up. They included the actual Death Attribute Magic skill, which he used all the time but hadn’t been able to push it past level 3, and other skills that had still been level 1. He even learned Alchemy, which he had been working on for almost two years now.

These job skill modifiers are no joke. Vandal could see for himself the ghouls were so happy with this.

He opened his status to check on his skills and stats.

Name: Vandal

Race: Dhampir (Dark Elf)

Age: 3 years old

Alias: Ghoul King

Job: Death Mage

Level: 0

Job History: None

——Status

Vitality: 50

Magical Power: 124906320

Strength: 45

Agility: 22

Muscle: 49

Intellect: 112

——Passive Skills

[Brute Strength: Level 1] [Rapid Healing: Level 2] [Death Attribute Magic: Level 4 (UP!)]

[Resist Maladies: Level 4] [Resist Magic: Level 1] [Night Vision] [Spirit Pollution: Level 10]

[Death Attribute Allure: Level 4 (UP!)] [Skip Incantation: Level 2 (UP!)]

[Enhance Brethren: Level 5 (UP!)] [Magical Power Auto Recovery: Level 1 (NEW!)]

——Active Skills

[Suck Blood: Level 3] [Limit Break: Level 3] [Golem Creation: Level 3]

[Non-Attribute Magic: Level 2 (UP!)] [Magic Control: Level 2 (UP!)]

[Spirit Body: Level 2 (UP!)] [Carpentry: Level 2 (UP!)] [Construction: Level 1]

[Cooking: Level 1 (NEW!)] [Alchemy: Level 1 (NEW!)]

——Curses

[Unable to carry over experience from previous lives] [Unable to enter existing jobs] [Unable to personally acquire experience]

“Wow,” Vandal murmured. “My stats have increased more than I expected. And look at those skills.”

The other Magician-type jobs he had heard about didn’t boost Vitality or Strength, so he was told, but those stats had increased. Maybe that came down to elements of race and his physical attributes. His Intellect, in particular, was now triple digits. No wonder his head felt so clear.

He had already possessed more than 100 million MP, and so the impact of the increase there was a little less, but he had received more than ten million more. Vandal was amazed by the power of a Job Change. That was all it took to get all this additional power!

He presumed the increases were based in a similar formula of a percentage increase from the unmodified amount. In the case of MP, that looked like maybe ten percent.

His skill levels had increased as well. He still had Flight active and could feel the difference. His two choices up until now had been to drift like some kind of

airborne jellyfish or just let the magic take him and fly at ridiculous speeds. Now he had more control over how he flew. His gains in Magic Control also probably played a role here.

He was so happy he could have skipped, but the last time he did that he had given people completely the wrong impression. He didn't want to be forced to take more time off. Vandal instead opted to quietly land on the floor and then leave the room.

Now, Vandal thought, it's time to level up!

That said, Vandal was still under the "unable to personally acquire experience" curse. No matter how many monsters he defeated, he couldn't level up.

Which meant he needed to take some of his undead along and head into the demon barrens or a dungeon. He hadn't made any new undead companions since Zadilis and the others joined him, so he was assuming he would go with the same team. But he was quickly inundated with requests to tag along.

"It's your first time going into the demon barrens and dungeons around here! You need a veteran like me, Sword King Borkz, rank A adventurer, to guide you! I know the dungeon layouts and the best spots to grind, you can trust me!"

"Taking you along would defeat the purpose, boss! You'll kill everything yourself. If you are going hunting, Child, please take me, Zulan, the elite scout!"

"No, no, you two. What he needs is healing. The Child can heal his undead, but the only magic he has for healing his own wounds is non-attribute. He needs me, Nuaza, with my command of life attribute magic, at his side!"

The giantling undead were clamoring to join him. So many of them wanted in

on the action that he could barely even tell who was speaking. After that, it was the ghouls.

“I’ve never been hunting with Van before. Sounds like an opportunity! I can start teaching you Brawling Proficiency!”

“Not you. I go. I teach Saria and Rita.”

“Don’t you want to learn about how adventurers fight? I can teach you.”

“Hey! I can do that too!”

“Me three!”

“Pick me!”

“I want to go as well.”

“Bugo! Bugo!”

The new species, like Braga, Zamed, Memedigga, and Gobba, all had their hands up too. Vandal couldn’t help up wonder whether the baby inside the Living Dead had its hand up as well. Coming with him was so popular that he couldn’t help but consider such an image.

It was still June, and yet this was a high-summer heat. He wondered if his time had finally come. If he had finally become . . . popular.

“Braga, you kids, you can wait a little longer. We need you to become . . . well, learn some skills, first,” Vandal said. He had been about to say, “become adults,” but they would only reply, “you’re still a child, King.” Not to mention that Braga the black goblin was already bigger than Vandal.

“Okay.” They all grunted and agreed pretty amicably. They might have bigger bodies but stats-wise they were still far below Vandal, and they knew for themselves that they lacked skills.

It was harder to decide who else to cut from the squad. The giantling undead and ghouls were far more proficient in battle than Vandal. They could handle business a lot better than him, with his reliance on hammering everything down with his vast MP. That had worked up until now, but if they were going to defeat the dragon golem, he needed to learn to fight more efficiently, and in cooperation with his allies.

He just had too many teachers to choose from.

It wasn't a question of fighting strength. He was going to tackle a rank D dungeon to start with, meaning Borkz and Vigaro would probably be too strong. Vigaro would be equal to, if not above the dungeon boss in such a location. For Borkz, all the monsters in such a place—including the boss—would be complete small fry.

"Okay. We'll settle this with reversi," someone suggested.

"Bring board and stones!" Borkz shouted.

"No, please, hold on a moment," Vandal said. He had taken too long to decide, leading to the proposal of a reversi tournament. "It will take days with this many people."

Talosheim was still in the middle of reversi mania, with the game was being used to decide a lot of things. Vandal thought that using Golem Creation to make ballots would be better idea.

"Boy!" Zadilis interrupted with a shout.

Surely she didn't want to tag along as well?

"Bildy is going into labor!"

No—this was news of a different kind.

“How is she doing?” Vandal asked.

Bildy had fallen pregnant in August of the previous year. It was now late June. It wasn't quite ten months and ten days, but not a dangerously early birth. Vandal had also been using Spirit Bodification to perform a magical sonogram every now and then. Unless she was about to guest star in a cliched TV medical show, she should be fine. Vandal was calm, but also interested. He had been working to resolve the infertility issues faced by the ghouls and used magic in all sorts of ways to prevent Bildy from having a miscarriage—of course he wanted to know how her birth turned out.

“She's doing fine. It's her first time, though, so it will probably be a long one,” Zadilis said. “Come on.”

“Excuse me?” Vandal said, and then gave a yelp. He hadn't expected to be carried off, but that's exactly what Zadilis did, plucking him up and heading away. She might have looked like only a teenager, but she was a ghoul elder with the Brute Strength skill.

“Hey! We haven't decided this yet!” Borkz shouted.

“We've got a bit of a situation,” Vandal replied.

Everyone watched him go, and he could see the cogs turning: why? What was the problem?

Young master! You need to put a brave face on it, or the lady in question will be quite upset! Stiff upper lip, young master! Sam called.

“Why would Bildy get upset with me?” Vandal asked. He wasn't married to her, and the child being born wasn't related to him either.

Just do your best, young master! came the reply from Rita.

“She's the one having the baby, not me!” Vandal fired back.

Saria was waving back and forth. It didn't look like the three of them were coming.

"Just to be clear—what position am I in here, exactly?" Vandal asked Zadilis. If Bildy wasn't in any trouble, then Vandal—who had no specialist gynecological knowledge and no experience as a midwife—surely didn't have any business being involved.

Zadilis replied with the child still tucked under her arm. "I might need your help if we face an unexpected medical emergency. Also, Bildy wants you to hold her hand," Zadilis said.

It sounded like his position was doctor and husband, then.

"Very well."

Ghouls didn't have the concept of marriage, meaning she just wanted someone to lean on. And he was the Ghoul King.

He accepted the situation.

This was just another type of adventure, in the end, and giving birth had still been difficult on Earth even with advanced medicine. Unfortunately, he was pretty sure he wouldn't earn any experience for this.



The room Zadilis had prepared for Bildy's birth was just another of the many ruined chambers that Talosheim had in abundance. It had been carefully cleaned, and then blankets of soft needle wolf belly fur were laid out on the floor. That was where Bildy was lying.

“First, Death to Bacteria. Bildy, are you okay?” Vandal asked.

There were three other ghoulish women in the room. Vandal assumed these were the actual midwives, ghouls with experience giving birth.

“V-Van . . .” Bildy noticed him coming in and reached out for him, sweat on her forehead, breathing hard around her contractions.

He took her small hand in his own, smaller hand.

“I’m going to have a healthy baby, you’ll see,” she said.

Vandal wasn’t sure how to respond to that. He was in a quite tricky position. Vandal also considered his own lack of expressions and muted tone of voice. If he said, “do your best,” it might sound kind of cold. That gave him pause. He wanted to sound as reassuring as possible . . .

“It’s okay. I’m here with you. Don’t worry.”

He didn’t have a medical license and had never been present at a birth, so he wasn’t sure what would be okay or why she shouldn’t worry, but keeping her spirits up was the most important thing at the moment. At moments like this, his lack of expressions helped out. It kept his lack of confidence off his face.

“Okay!” she replied.

He had been successful, it seemed. She was clearly in pain, but she gave him a smile. In light of that result, the fact her nails were digging into his right hand didn’t really bother him. They squeezed tighter, pinching him, but he didn’t care.

What he did care about, however, was the shadow of death he noticed on her face.

“Keep your breathing even—short in, long out,” one of the ghouls said.

“If you have a moment, can you check her status? Is her Vitality okay?”

“I’m on it. All fine.”

From the look of the others in the room, they hadn’t realized that anything was going on. To them, at this point it didn’t look like there was a problem with Bildy or the baby.

“Let me just take a look,” Vandal said.

The shadow was definitely there. Vandal turned his free left arm into a spirit body using Spirit Bodification and inserted it into Bildy’s belly. There he discovered that the umbilical cord was wrapped around the neck of the infant. If things progressed like this, the infant would have died for sure.

Lucky Zadilis called me, Vandal thought, freeing the cord. It would have been easier with his right hand, but it was still no problem.

“Boy, something the matter?” Zadilis asked.

“Nothing I can’t fix,” Vandal assured her. The bones in Vandal’s right hand were squealing, and Bildy’s claws were pumping paralytic toxin into him, but mother and baby were both fine.

“Okay! Then it all comes down to you now, Bildy!” Zadilis said.

She was correct, as well, as Vandal had nothing else to do other than provide a hand to hold onto and some reassuring support. The birth did take six hours, however, giving Vandal a thorough education in the power of motherhood.

A pale grey baby with a scrunched-up face. She was the first precious baby ghou to be born into the grotto in some time.

“Look, it’s a girl,” Bildy cooed. “I can’t use your whole name, Vandal, but could

I take half?" The ghoulish mother looked so happy, doting on her new baby in her arms.

He almost asked if the actual father might have a problem with that arrangement but knew better than to say anything at this point.

"Sure," he replied simply. He heard later that, as the ghouls had no system of marriage, it was generally the mother who decided the name of the baby, with some discussion with the elder. If Bildy wanted to use part of Vandal's name for the child, she was free to do so.

"Do you want to hold her?" Bildy asked.

"Of course," Vandal replied.

The baby was sleeping peacefully. Vandal wanted to accept her with both arms, but the bones in his right hadn't healed yet and all those hours of toxin meant it wasn't working very well, so instead he took the baby with his left and then rested her in his lap.

"She's so light and warm," Vandal said. The baby was very light indeed. Yet she had 300 years of life ahead of her as she grew up big and strong. The miracle of life. The birth of a new life was an emotional moment. Vandal was experiencing this for the first time, here in his own third life.

When he had been alive on Earth, some TV documentary ragging on about "the birth of a new life" hadn't made him bat an eyelid. It meant nothing to him to watch people he had no connection with or the birth of wild animals on a screen.

But after experiencing death, not once but twice—indeed, three times, if his own becoming undead on Origin was counted, and now with his own goal of bringing Dalshia back, he could feel the impact of this moment wholeheartedly.

He would do whatever was needed to protect this child. He might not be the father, but he was Ghoul King.

“I’m going to postpone the dungeon expedition,” Vandal explained.

Borkz and Vigaro didn’t look especially happy, but they accepted it. The remaining nine pregnant ghouls were all going to start coming to term. If anything else unexpected happened, Vandal wouldn’t be able to respond if he was off in the demon barrens or a dungeon.

“It’s been a while since we heard a baby crying!”

“Once she’s settled down, can we see the baby too?”

“Not so long ago, we were simply waiting for these ruins to return to dust. Having a new life born here is a wonderful thing.”

“Good! Drink!”

“If we had any booze.”

“We do! It just tastes bad!”

The ghouls were happy about the birth, after such a long time worrying about infertility. Borkz and the giantling undead were also celebrating the birth of the baby.

There might have been health concerns about letting undead near a baby, but not with Vandal around. He had already cast Death to Bacteria, Death to Bugs, Remove Odor, and Maintain Freshness on all of the giantling undead. Once they finished with the sewerage system, Talosheim would become a fortress city equal to any in the Amidd Empire when it came to hygiene, although it still retained the feeling of a ghost town, what with the small population when

compared to the size of the place.

“I’m planning on enhancing the defenses of Talosheim and using Alchemy to make items to help resolve the infertility problems,” Vandal said. “We can find time for adventuring and training between those tasks.”

Anyone serious about mastering the path of martial arts or magic would probably have told him not to half-ass it, but no one piped up. Instead, there was a flood of other comments.

“Okay! We’ll decide the order of who goes along!”

“This is perfect. No one has been in the dungeons for 200 years, so we don’t know what’s happening in there. There must be lots of monsters, so I’ll thin them out a bit for you!”

“There might be more unexplored floors now.”

“What about combat techniques? Guess we’ll need to at least practice the basics.”

“Squeak! Master, I will do everything I can to catch up in level with my comrades in that time!”

“We get skill too!”

Vandal took a moment to appreciate the wealth of kindness that he had found in his third life.

He started with creating magic items to help with the ghouls’ infertility. He could work on the defenses of Talosheim after the city had been extracted from the forest demon barren; otherwise, they would also be lending their protection to needle wolves and raptors.

The giantlings told him to wait a few more days. The problem was numbers, not strength. Belligerent needle wolves were one thing, but the smarter raptors would run off if they didn't think they could win, making them difficult to wipe out.

“As for the magic items, I'm planning on making two types,” Vandal said. “An item that extends the active time for the sperm and the egg, and an item that keeps the fetus alive until it becomes strong enough to survive.”

Zadilis nodded in approval. “It's difficult to make a single item with two effects, after all.”

They were in the building next door to the (temporary) birthing suite, with Vandal, Zadilis, Talea, Basdia, and other ghouls all discussing how to make the magic items.

“For the item that extends the active time for the sperm and egg, I'm thinking of an accessory that will be easy to take on and off,” Vandal said.

“If everyone wears it all the time, we will end up with more children than we know what to do with,” Zadilis agreed.

Vandal nodded. “We can't have the change be too sudden.”

Ghouls had never been able to easily get pregnant, and when they did most of those pregnancies failed. That was why they had no marriage system; their society was built around continually trying to have children. They had relaxed a little since Bildy and the others got pregnant, but still. Just because Vandal was making some new magic items, it didn't mean all the ghouls were going to suddenly start family planning—especially as they didn't have the kind of convenient contraception here that had been available on Earth.

Of course, it wouldn't be too much of an issue if they had plenty of kids.

Better than having none. There was plenty of room in Talosheim, and plenty of food. But they didn't want too many. Ghouls weren't like Braga and the other monster kids who had already been born; they took a lot longer than a year to mature, for one thing.

"It will be hard, for sure. One child is difficult enough; try giving a ghoul two or three of them at once," Talea said.

"Many of them, like Bildy, have never had children before," Zadilis added.

There were no kindergartens here, no books or TV shows to provide information on child raising, and no internet either. Talea and Zadilis had both had children of their own, so their concerns were justified about ghouls developing neuroses concerning children. Not that such a thing wasn't possible with only one child.

"In that case, I think we should make the items while also explaining about contraception," Vandal suggested.

"Good idea. Human lifespans are one thing. We live for much longer. Having lots of kids will be nice, but once every five, ten years is probably enough," Basdia said. In the case of humans—and especially in professions such as Farmers—they couldn't afford to take their time with the difficult business of raising children. Vandal imagined there wasn't much family planning in Ramda, either. Medicine was underdeveloped, meaning there had to be a strong sentiment of having children while one was still young and healthy. On that point, as Basdia stated, it was easy enough to convince the ghouls. Humans probably would have pushed back.

"But what about the men? They can't go five or ten years without any action," someone said.

“That’s why we make the accessory easily removable,” Vandal said. “You only wear it when you want to get pregnant.”

It was essentially reverse contraception.

“What shall we make it, then?” Zadilis asked.

“I was thinking a pendant, maybe, or a leg chain,” Vandal replied.

The shape of a magic item and the location it was worn were both very important. They affected the difficulty of creating the item using Alchemy, the materials used, and the strength of the effect. For example, if the task was to create a magical item that allowed one to walk in the air, most people would think of making a pair of shoes, surely. Few people would think to make a pair of glasses.

Depending on the magic being applied and the desired effect, there were therefore certain shapes and ways of wearing the item that made the item easier to produce and more effective. A ring or armband for enhancing physical strength. Glasses for seeing. Boots or an anklet to run faster.

Of course, there were some magic items out there in the world that ignored such principles, like a pair of shoes that allowed you to see in the dark, but they required a high level of Alchemy and expensive materials to create.

At the moment, they had more materials than even food. All the monster hunting had produced a heap of materials, and their only avenue to use them was to consume the materials themselves. There wasn’t even an adventurers’ guild to sell the magic stones. Braga and the other kids, when they were smaller, had used those as marbles.

Vandal was the only one who among them who could create death attribute magic items, and his Alchemy skill level was 1. That limited them to items like a

thigh chain, which would be close to the target area, or a pendant that could at least hang down low around the chest. A belt might have worked as well, but ghouls didn't wear belts and probably wouldn't take to that. He had difficulty suggesting anything worn more closely and would probably have trouble making it if such an item was selected.

"Do you have any preferred colors or designs?" Vandal asked.

He had brought Basdia and the others into this to ask this very question. They would be the ones wearing these items, so they should be something they liked. Especially given that they would be wearing them even during the act itself.

"Good question. White, black, silver, or gold. Those are popular colors," Basdia replied.

"Red is preferred for battle, not at other times."

"Everyone likes feathery shapes. And hearts, too."

The ghoule women were quick to share ghoule trends with him. Vandal had no confidence in his own fashion sense, so this was a big help.

On Ramda, the classic heart shape was apparently the symbol of the Goddess Vida. It made sense, given it came from the goddess of life attribute magic. But a black heart didn't sound especially appealing. A silver one might work better?

"We'll make a few options and see how they turn out," Talea said.

"Please go ahead," Vandal requested.

Talea and the other ghoule craftsmen would create the actual physical items. Alchemy skills were only used when it came to imbuing the items with magic. Generally, the physical object was created by another Craftsman. There were some Alchemy masters who did everything themselves, from collecting the materials to creating the final piece, but they were the limited exceptions to the

rule.

“Okay. What about the item that enhances the vitality of the fetus? We don’t want that to come off so easily,” Zadilis said. A moment ago, she had been muttering about the gaudy tastes of young ghouls today, after that silver and gold comment.

“I wasn’t sure about that either,” Vandal admitted.

Zadilis was correct. If the item fell off and got lost, or the user forgot to put it on that day, and the baby died . . . it would be a terrible tragedy. But they couldn’t exactly put it inside the user, either.

The two of them look around, thinking.

“What about a tattoo?” Zadilis said.

“A piercing. Has to be,” Vandal said in the same moment.

They both looked at each other, surprised at the different ideas.

“Boy, an earring would be too far from the womb. A tattoo will never vanish, and can be placed anywhere,” Zadilis said.

“I said piercing,” Vandal countered. “I wasn’t talking about the ear or nose, but the bellybutton. Who do even we have who can make tattoos?”

It seemed the ghouls didn’t have the concept of tummy piercings, while Vandal hadn’t considered the idea of turning a tattoo into a magic item. They discussed the matter further and eventually settled on the idea of the piercing.

“When the belly swells up with the baby, won’t that change the tattoo?” Basdia had said, finally swinging the argument in Vandal’s favor. “The current baby might not need it by then, but a tattoo can’t be redone for the next pregnancy either. I think a piercing is the better idea.”

It wasn't just the ghouls, but all of Ramda that held the fixed idea of piercings remaining above the next. In the future, bellybutton piercings too would spread from Talosheim around the entire world.



Vandal continued to pass the days, surrounded by the warmth of others, yes, but in a manner that was perhaps a little extreme for a three-year-old.

He had one day off a week. But if a pregnant ghoul went into labor on that day, then he was called into action. In that case, he would take a few hours off the following day. This schedule formed the basis of his lifestyle. While Talea and the others worked up the prototypes for the magic items, Vandal passed the time repairing and fortifying Talosheim and honing his combat abilities.

The repairing and fortifying parts were easy.

“Rise, unify, leave,” Vandal commanded. He was using Golem Creation, so that was all he had to say. The rubble lying on the ground grew arms and legs and started walking around, merged together, changed shape, and basically repaired itself.

It wasn't easy to make a building from scratch, but putting back together something that was just a little rundown was a different story. His Carpentry skill gave him a good idea how to proceed. On Ramda, the ghouls' dugout homes and the giantling's stone ones could all be created with the same skills.

He also used his Construction skill to repair the sewerage system and roads. Talosheim had an underground sewerage system. It used water-purifying magic items to clean the water, gathering the waste matter in a single place and then

fermenting it and turning it into compost. Untouched for 200 years, it naturally needed some work.

First, Vandal used golems to remove the ground and expose the piping. Then he turned the piping into golems and fixed the cracks and blockages. He had learned Resist Degradation, and so he cast that too and then put the pipes back in the ground.

Next, he supplied MP to the water purification items. An unknown but decidedly gross-looking monster had formed in the fermentation barrels, which he had the undead take care of. Once that was done, the sewerage system could be used once more. The water still had to be drawn from wells or the waterways, but afterward they could just let it run away, which was very convenient.

After three years living on Ramda, Vandal had gained a new respect for the underground sewerage systems of Earth. Even more so having been Japanese.

Once he fixed up the system, he planned for golems to maintain it automatically.

During the same period, he also had Basdia teach him the basics of combat.

“You have physical prowess much like a ghoul, Vandal. No need to hold back!”

He proceeded to learn a number of forms, and ways to defend against or avoid them—which he learned the hard way. Basdia would sweep out his legs, kick him, throw him, stamp on him. It was stunning how one-sided their sessions were. He wasn’t using his magic, of course, but he was also starting to doubt his own strength.

“You have muscles, Vandal, and are sensitive to threats, but when you attack, it’s too simple and you use too much force. You need to be quicker, throw in

some feints, and try to predict what your opponent will do next,” Basdia advised him.

She was aware that Vandal didn’t like being scolded too strictly, and disliked teaching methods based in the theoretical. So while she didn’t hold back when they were actually training, she made sure to use a gentle tone when she spoke to him afterward. That combination allowed Vandal with train while keeping a cool head.

Up until that point, he had defended himself entirely using magic. Even when he did attack, he used a simple sledgehammer of his overwhelming MP. This was partially because he was still so small, and Vandal had just accepted that as the norm. He was originally a Japanese kid who had never been in a fight, and then an Origin lab rat who did nothing but brawl like a beast. He had considered himself something far removed from combat techniques and the martial arts.

But, perhaps thanks to his vampire father, he actually had a talent for them.

“The most impressive thing is how you don’t turn your eyes away,” Basdia commented. “It took me three months to learn not to flinch when someone attacked my face, but you didn’t bat an eyelid from the start. Most impressive.”

“Thank you,” Vandal replied.

After being hit on the cheeks and forehead—lightly, perhaps, but still hit—Vandal’s face was looking a little more flushed than normal, but his eyes had stayed wide open.

“Even if I did lose my eyes, I could use Spirit Bodification on my face to see with my Spirit, so I’d be okay,” Vandal said. This knowledge was influencing his instincts and reactions.

Every few days, another of the ghouls went into labor, and Vandal was there

for each birth. There was nothing so dramatic as the twisted cord every time, and the births went off as “easily” as the hard work and drama of the process allowed. In the end, each baby was safely born.

The ghouls that had given birth, including Bildy, were all doing well. They were physically tougher than humans, for one thing, and they were living in the demon barrens. Zadilis and Talea had experience with their own children to share, so everything appeared to be going well.

It was the middle of July when he became busier with the magic item creation. Imbuing magic into the items created by Talea and her team was not easy. Restoring the castle walls had been much easier.

“At this pace I can only make three a day,” Vandal commented.

“You are only skill level 1, boy. That’s more than respectable,” Zadilis said.

“If you go too fast, we won’t be able to keep up with production ourselves,” Talea stated. “Making accessories isn’t really my specialty.”

There were approximately 600 ghouls that needed magic items. At this pace, it would take more than 300 days to make enough. However, not all the ghouls wanted children immediately, so there was no need to hurry.

“Your numbers suggest you plan to make them for me and Talea, too. Is that a roundabout way of letting us know something?” Zadilis asked.

“Oh my, how brazen of you!” Talea exclaimed. “I might look young but I’m 260, thank you very much. Although, if you are the one asking, Lord Van . . .”

“Please, don’t pick on the three-year-old. If you keep this up, something may actually happen in a decade or two,” Vandal replied.

The banter continued as they made more magic items. The process involved using organs from the monsters they had defeated and ground-up magic

stones. Vandal only realized that one of the stones had come from the noble orc after he crushed it up.

In his downtime, he was also trying all sorts of different things.

“Pack in the fish and . . . Ferment.”

He didn’t have any beans, so he was trying to make soy sauce using fish. On Origin he had been given the opportunity to try and had managed it in just three attempts. It had a fishy smell, but there were herbs to lessen that.

Next, he tried to use walnuts and acorns to make miso, but this proved to be a lot harder. His Fermentation magic did work, but the flavor wasn’t so great. The researchers on Origin had used his magical power to make miso countless times, so he was accustomed to it. But using walnuts and acorns was a first for him, making it a lot harder.

“It’s not as good as the walnut miso I heard about on Earth,” Vandal muttered to himself. “But it still has the walnut flavor and acorn aroma. It isn’t all that bad.”

Vandal wasn’t aware that the walnut miso he had heard about on Earth hadn’t been created by fermenting walnuts and salt rather than beans; instead, it had been made by adding walnuts to regular miso. When he finally reached a flavor that he could accept, however, he used Mature to deepen the flavor and produce a sample.

The ghouls also found some wasabi and ginger growing in the semi-demon barren, which he immediately started to cultivate. With ginger, it was simply a case of turning the spot where it was growing into a field and then fertilizing it every now and then. That was all it took to bring in a harvest of ginger every day. The demon barrens were wonderful.

Cultivating the wasabi took a bit more work. He used Death to Bacteria to prevent other plants from growing around it, but that same skill prevented the wasabi itself from growing, and it hadn't got any bigger. Then he tried making stakes imbued with Detoxify and placed them close to the wasabi to suppress the Death to Bacteria. It had taken a while but, in the end, he was ultimately successful. Before long he would need to search the demon barrens for a new source of wasabi.

He also made some sets of Jenga. He turned pieces of wood into golems and then made them all roughly the same shape. The process was even easier than making reversi.

Later, the undead giantlings gathered around a jar of black liquid.

"Is this the legendary soy sauce? That Hero Zakkato attempted to create, but could never achieve?"

"Whatever it is, it's pretty good."

Soy sauce was harder to make than miso, meaning it must have been even harder for Zakkato to recreate it—hero or otherwise. He had apparently succeeded in creating miso, but Bellwood had burnt down the miso stores before it could spread. That meant few alive today even knew of miso. Bellwood clearly had a lot to answer for.

Ginger and wasabi had already been used in cooking, but everyone was happy that cultivation had led to a stable supply. Jenga, meanwhile, was just as successful in Talosheim as reversi. There weren't any undead Wood Craftsmen, and so the giantlings and ghouls would come to Vandal with monster meat and ask to trade it for Jenga sets.

"I wonder if I could just spend the rest of my life making condiments and toys

here,” Vandal pondered. It was a primitive form of trading, but he could probably live a comfortable life.

The magic item-making started to settle down. By the time summer had passed and the footsteps of fall approached in September, Talosheim was again surrounded by white, sturdy castle walls.

It was finally time to start his experience-gathering adventure.

“Today, we hit the dungeon.”

Level increased for Alchemy, Carpentry, Construction, and Cooking skills!



In the midst of a hidden darkness, there was a massive table. Red liquid was poured into wine glasses and served to those gathered around it. The assembly was elegant, refined. Each attendee wore the kind of clothing that, if sold, could feed an entire peasant family for a year, topped off with jewels and accessories.

At first glance, it was a gathering of nobles. But those here today weren’t noble in the conventional sense. The men might have looked elegant and proud. The women might have been beautiful and delicate. And everyone gathered there was deeply intelligent.

But at their core, they were all cold, merciless, cruel, blood-sucking fiends.

With his crimson eyes sparkling, the progenitor species vampire who was to be master of his ceremony took a sip of the fresh blood in his glass. “Let us begin the convocation. The first issue . . . this dhampir business.”

The age of the gods: the most peaceful time in Ramda's history and the most prosperous. But Demon King Gudranis and his countless legions of Demon and Devil Gods ended it.

There was the Demon God of the Toxic Hex, capable of cursing the water, earth, and even the air, poisoning all living things. There was the Devil God of Insane Murder, a master of death who taught the joy of blood to those who lived to hunt or compare arms. The Demon God of Warped Flesh toyed with all forms of life, creating a menagerie of tarrying composite beasts. The Devil God of Consuming Greed used vices that had never existed on Ramda to allure and corrupt the people.

The gods and their heroes managed to defeat the heads of this terrible snake, but countless Demon and Devil Gods remained, lurking everywhere in the world.

One of these was the Demon God of Living Pleasure, Hihiryu-Shukaka, a direct servant of the Demon God of Warped Flesh. In turn, there was a community of vampires who worshipped Hihiryu-Shukaka and received his blessings.

For Hihiryu-Shukaka, the act of toying with living creatures was the ultimate joy, and the way to prove oneself superior to others. If one were to beg for their life, he would give them hope, make them serve him, then plunge them back into despair before killing them. If there was a crawling bug that begged for strength, he would give it more power than it could possibly handle, leading it to its own destruction amid pleading cries to take back his gifts. If there were one who boasted of their bravery and prowess, he would steal that strength, dismember them, pluck out their eyes, rip out their tongue, and leave them to crawl like a bug on the ground.

Achieving these feats, so the Demon God's teachings went, would allow you to ascend, becoming a more powerful being. Piling up the weak at your feet would allow you to climb to fresh heights. Taking these teachings into account, to Hihiryu-Shukaka, perhaps bringing some vampires into the fold after their loss of the Goddess of Life Vida was just another game.

A hundred thousand years later, the sect that worshipped the Demon God of Living Pleasure had become one of the strongest among the vampires who had chosen to serve these new and terrible gods.

They were dominated by three incredibly powerful progenitor species vampires. Below them there were more than 100 noble species vampires. Below them, a countless number of subordinate species and vampire worshippers who hoped to achieve eternal life. The bottom rung of the ladder, below even those, consisted of undead, monsters, mercenaries, and bandits, many of them oblivious even to the fact they were doing vampire bidding and far too numerous to count. This sect had the combat strength of a powerful military, and the influence to control a mighty nation from the shadows.

"The first issue . . . this dhampir business." So said Vilkain, one of the three progenitor species vampires who commanded this community. He appeared to be a thin, kindly-looking man around twenty years of age, born in a time without the noble system and yet with an undoubtedly noble air. The type to gather well-off young folk to throw tea parties or balls.

"Dhampir? You mean the one born to that subordinate species of yours and the mercenary woman?" This came from a woman who looked somewhere over twenty. She had a body men would go wild for and beauty that, with some attention, could surely bag any man, but they were clouded by a listlessness in her eyes. She wore a gaudy but tasteless dress, open wide at the chest and

exposing most of her back. More than a noblewoman, she looked like a prostitute who served noble clientele. “We solved that problem. Mother and child are still in my castle, sewn back-to-back, eight limbs at work.”

“Tehneshia, that was 100 years ago,” Vilkain reminded her.

“Oh. You mean the one born from the beastman, then? You killed that one yourself. The whole clan of them,” she said.

“And that was 500 years ago,” Vilkain replied.

This was starting to sound like a bad comedy skit, but Tehneshia was another progenitor species vampires. She was a female vampire, the third in command in this community, but perhaps the strongest.

“I’m talking about the dhampir born to that subordinate species vampire, far below Gubamon, and the dark elf woman.”

“Yes! Good old Gubamon! Yes, yes, that was a thing. Where is he, then? I don’t see him here,” Tehneshia said, looking around.

Gubamon was the last of the progenitor species vampires who commanded this community.

“L-Lord Gubamon is too busy to attend . . .” A pale-faced noble species vampire stammered out the message. He was quivering under Tehneshia’s gaze.

“What? Another no show? I only miss nine out of ten of these things! He hasn’t been here for the last twenty! You drag him here, right now, do you hear me?” she raged.

“Please, forgive me! I have a message to convey his apologies to you both, Lady Tehneshia, Lord Vilkain, but Lord Gubamon simply cannot make the time to attend!”

“Enough chatter. Do you wish to become one of my works of art?” Tehneshia looked ready to jam her teeth into the cowering vampire.

The other noble species and Vilkain chuckled at the sight. They might be comrades, allies, but they weren’t prone to sympathy.

“Please, restrain yourself. I have already been informed of the situation,” Vilkain said.

Subordinate species were one thing, but making noble species took quite a lot of work. It would be great fun to Vilkain if the Gubamon and Tehneshia factions started killing each other, but it could also shatter the entire community. He enjoyed the show for a moment, then put a stop to it.

“You have?” Tehneshia said.

“Yes. As you know, Gubamon had his men execute Varen. The body was disposed of with complete assurances that he will revive. The mother, the dark elf, was apparently burned alive by the faithful fanatics of Amidd,” Vilkain reported.

“Not bad, for the minions of an old goat who only cares about his collection. But what about the actual dhampir?” Tehneshia asked.

“That got away from them.”

“What?!”

Vilkain relished Tehneshia’s response for a moment, his eyes twitching and lips curling, before he continued his explanation.

“They couldn’t find him, at first, but he was still a helpless baby so they decided he wouldn’t survive. We still don’t know how it happened, but now he is back, not even three years old, with a couple of hundred ghouls under his command. When a large-scale force of humans was sent out to track them

down and eradicate the problem, he took his ghouls and fled across the Boundary Mountains. How, we don't know. I have to say, this one is all a bit of a puzzle."

With that, Vilkain took a moment to look not just at Tehneshia, but also to take in the responses of the other vampires. Some thought it was a joke, with smiles forming on their faces. Other were surprised and shocked. Others confused, assuming they misheard.

"Well, this is a bad joke!" Tehneshia was the only one who got angry. "So they assumed he was dead and dropped their guard, letting that dhampir obtain hundreds of minions and cross the Boundary Mountains! What was the fool entrusted with this task thinking?! Does he even have a brain to think? He should be killed at once!"

Her fangs were bared as she exploded with anger, but Tehneshia wasn't scared of the dhampir. She just understood the bigger picture. There were reasons why they had ruled the shadows for tens of thousands of years: because they had the protection of the Demon God, and because they always rigged the battlefield so they could win. If they were just dealing with a dhampir and some humans, this wouldn't be so dangerous. But beyond the Boundary Mountains, there were the progenitor species who stilled worshipped Vida—those who were equal in strength to themselves. Those vampires had hardly shown any movement for more tens of thousands of years, but if they stirred into action, then Tehneshia's own side would have to fight for their very survival.

"She speaks the truth, Lord Vilkain! Execute the failure and allow us to handle this dhampir!"

Vampires started to speak up one after the other, seeking a chance to prove

themselves.

“No! Allow me, Carmain, to deal with the problem!”

“I can surely meet your every expectation, Lord Vilkain, Lady Tehneshia!”

Even success in such a task could not allow a noble species to become a progenitor, but winning the approval of Hihiryu-Shukaka could allow one to earn so-called Blessings. A single Blessing could provide double the strength and authority of other noble species.

“Wait, wait,” Vilkain said. “I am inclined to give the failure one last chance to prove himself.”

“What?!” Tehneshia exclaimed. “You would show mercy to someone who already failed twice? He will surely just fail a third time!”

“I agree, but he made his case quite passionately. Allow me to introduce him to you.”

Vilkain raised a white, slender hand into the air. With a crash, a man dropped down from above, covered in blood.

“Here he is now. This is Sercrent Ozba. One of Gubamon’s men.” Vilkain still had a gentle smile on his face as he indicated the noble species vampire, Sercrent Ozba, who was connected to Count Thomas Palpapekk. All he could do was moan.

There were silver spikes inserted into each of his fingers, his legs looked like they had been roasted alive, and his back was covered with what looked like lumps of meat. The masses pulsed and popped, releasing hairless, skinless rat-like creatures to crawl out and devour the flesh around them. After eating their own weight in flesh, they stuck their head into the freshly chewed holes and returned inside Sercrent’s flesh. This was one of Hihiryu-Shukaka’s curses.

“Forgive . . . forgive me . . . I will . . .” Sercrent managed. He raised his head, looking at the other vampires, and many of them gasped—because he had no face to speak of. His eyes had been plucked out, his nose removed, his cheeks shaved off, and his lips shredded, leaving nothing more than a bloody skull.

The worst part of all was that none of this was life threatening. The Vitality and healing powers of a noble species vampire were potent indeed.

Even a noble species vampire, these proud creatures that had surpassed mortal constraints, were nothing more than toys to Vilkain. The other vampires fell silent, faced with confirmation of this fact once again.

Tehneshia rose from her seat and moved over to Sercrent, where the meat rats were still eating his regenerating flesh. She kicked him in the face, and he gasped in pain.

“Vilkain, what do you expect this trash pile to achieve? He couldn’t kill a caterpillar.”

Rasps of air came from Sercrent’s crushed face. He did indeed look more like a man waiting execution rather than some kind of assassin.

“I fear Lady Tehneshia is correct,” offered another female vampire. “This man could never cross the Boundary Mountains, locate the target, defeat hundreds of ghouls, and kill this dhampir.”

The vampires were a powerful race. Looking at just the progenitor species, it was no exaggeration to say they were the strongest of Vida’s new races. One of them alone could kill dragons or destroy an entire country. Only a party of rank A or higher adventurers equipped with legendary magic items could hope to stand against them.

Sercrent, however, was a noble species, a few steps down. He was clearly a

threat to your average knights or adventurers, but the Boundary Mountains were filled with monsters of comparable strength. A vampire who tried to fly high over the mountains would inevitably enter a demon barren of the skies, known as a demon roost. There they would encounter sky monsters and likely be swiftly ripped apart. On the other hand, crawling over the ground like a mere mortal would take an inordinate length of time, and even then, there was no guarantee of safety or success. Unknown demon barrens and undiscovered dungeons were overflowing with hungry monsters.

To avoid all that, Sercrent would need to put together a party of hundreds of fierce warriors capable of handling such monsters and fighting while climbing the perilous cliffs of the mountains. That was impossible too, unless the gods themselves or their close brethren were involved—or perhaps, if he was the greatest con man who had ever lived.

It wasn't just about crossing the mountains, either. Then he would need to track the dhampir, sneak past however many ghouls have survived the trip, and kill the boy. If he could complete the mission, most of the vampires present didn't care what happened to him after that, but it would all be for naught if he perished beforehand.

"It will be fine. Sercrent has agreed to give his life for this mission. Isn't that right, Sercrent?" Vilkain asked.

"Y-Yes! Leave it—leave it to me!" Sercrent barely managed, words mangled by his split tongue and shattered face. The other vampires were amazed that he had even heard the question.

"It doesn't matter if he's the most motivated man the world has ever seen," Tehneshia countered. "I'm saying that he can't possibly pull it off."

"You are correct, Tehneshia, of course. That is why I plan to send one of my

lovers along with him,” Vilkain said.

“What? One of your whores?” Tehneshia retorted.

The other vampires stirred a little, with barely concealed awe and loathing seeping onto their faces. Vampires were proud creatures who would never put someone of the same rank above themselves. The hierarchy among the subordinate species and the noble species was fixed, and those who fell down it were viewed as nothing more than slaves. At least, this was how the vampires who had decided to worship the Demon and Devil Gods saw things.

Vilkain loved to see that in action. It might be called a hobby. Compared to his real passions, such as torture, it was simply a way to pass the time. He took his minions who were noble or subordinate species and made them compete with each other. Make them fight. Make them bleed. The winner would receive his favors, and the loser bitter punishment. Now he was planning to do that with one of his own lovers, his own personal guard, and this Sercrent, the minion of Gubamon.

“Eleonora, you will do this for me?” Vilkain asked.

A beautiful woman appeared from his shadow, with red hair down to her waist. She had an alluring smile, one aspect of such beauty that would cause nobles to overrun each other for the chance to slather her with their silver tongues.

“Yes,” she said. “I will do whatever you need.”

Vilkain chuckled. “Try to play nice with Sercrent, please. Also, you may pass close to the ruins of Talosheim. If you do, see if you can pick up the bones of Sword King Borkz for me. I would love for Gubamon to owe me another favor.”

“Very well, my beloved,” she replied.

Eleonora. She was the youngest among Vilkain minions and had only become a noble species a few years prior, but she was already making waves. Some thought, given a few hundred years, she could become the most powerful vampire serving the Demon God of Living Pleasure, excepting the progenitor species themselves. Tehneshia had herself already killed a few of her own underlings for complaining that they couldn't match her.



“Huh. Don’t drop your guard and have a nasty accident,” Tehneshia said. With that barely concealed ill will, the first part of the proceedings was completed.

The convocation continued as planned. The vampires passed the long night with the exchange of the usual information: what was happening with the Guild of Darkness, the recent movements of the Temple of Amidd, and the intensification of the fighting over succession in the house of Duke Heartner. They reported on each of their ongoing projects and finally introduced candidates to become subordinate species vampires and approved their transformation. Then the meeting was concluded.

The Death Mage

CHAPTER FOUR
A NOBLE IDEAL

Chapter Four: A Noble Ideal

There were four dungeons in the demon barrens close to Talosheim: Garan Valley, Doran Aquatic Cavern, Borkz Demi-Dragon Plains, and Barigen Death Mountain. All of them were dungeons based on the surrounding natural environment, and the produce obtained from within had supported the prosperity of Talosheim.

Vandal had chosen to tackle Garan Valley, the lowest of the four as a rank D. It was probably around the same difficulty as the dungeon he had already cleared in the Milg Shield Kingdom (at least, Vandal presumed so). New recruits in Talosheim had trained there, and it served as a foundation of Talosheim's glory. From within, rock salt and stone could be obtained. Without the rock salt, in particular, Talosheim would have had difficulty expanding beyond the boundaries of a small village, trapped as it was among the mountains.

Vandal was currently on the first floor of Garan Valley. His party was all the regular faces, minus Sam, with Basdia in his place. He was fighting a spear-wielding and squealing Goblin Soldier in one-on-one combat. The attacks looked very slow to Basdia's trained eye, but they did at least count as spear techniques, repeatedly thrusting toward Vandal. Vandal dodged the attacks before countering with his claws.

"Gya-gyah!" screeched the gobbling, evading in kind and unleashing further spear attacks.

If viewed as a three-year-old child fighting a monster, the scene was worrying. But as a battle between two warriors, it was little more than a comedy of errors. There were dozens of Goblin Soldier bodies scattered around him, which

had been killed, not by Vandal, but by the skeletons and Basdia. They had wiped out the horde of attacking Goblin Soldiers, leaving just one alive so that Vandal could test his skills.

How is the young master doing with Brawling Proficiency? Saria asked, the blood freshly wiped from her halberd.

“I’m not sure how to reply to that,” Basdia admitted. “Like I said to Van, he has potential. So much potential, it’s kind of scary. But I wouldn’t exactly call him a genius.”

Which means . . . he does have talent? Saria asked, presumably tilting her nonexistent head.

He learns much quicker than us, sister, Rita said. *He’ll overtake us in no time.* As Rita saw things, in life the two of them had simply been maids. They might have used a broom to sweep the floor, but that was a far cry from swinging halberds around or shooting monsters with arrows. Their stats received boosts by becoming monsters, at least allowing them to wield weapons. Vigaro complained about their unpolished technique but had trained them as well. As undead, they never tired or needed sleep, allowing them to train through the night, and this had finally allowed them to learn some skills.

By comparison, Vandal did seem to learn faster. He slept through the night and only trained for around one hour a week on his day off. He took damage from Goblin Soldier counterattacks, but that couldn’t be helped. He was made of more than just armor, unlike the sisters.

“Van doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t show fear, and doesn’t panic,” Basdia observed.

“Squeak? Isn’t that a good thing?” the skeleton asked. He was poking around

in the bodies of the goblins with the tip of his sword, searching for magic stones.

“That’s right. It’s good. Vigaro always got mad at me when I was starting out. Telling me not to flinch, not be afraid, not to panic,” Basdia said, reflecting on her own beginnings. She was a rank 4 Ghoul Warrior now, but she hadn’t been so strong from the start. When she was a child, she had fought through strict training in order to survive in the demon barrens. The ghouls focused entirely on practical training. She had fought captured weak goblins, just like Vandal was doing now.

But actual combat and training were two different things. When fighting someone actively trying to kill you, worrying about whether an attack would be effective enough or what to do if it was avoided created hesitation. Eyes desperate to kill and attacks that sought to draw blood generated fear of injury or death. One’s own failure to perform as intended could result in panic.

Is that a thing? Rita said.

Hmmm, I understand the panic thing, Saria said.

Me too. I don’t get hesitation or being scared, but I can understand panic, Rita commented. The undead didn’t really seem to understand, with different sensibilities from living creatures and all.

“But Van doesn’t have any of those things,” Basdia said. Vandal attacked without hesitation, took counterattacks without fear and pain, and countered without a trace of panic. She even asked him if it was his usual blank expression covering things up, but he said he really wasn’t feeling any hesitation.

“At worst, I’ll get a little scratched up. This isn’t going to kill me,” Vandal said. He had his Detect Danger: Death magic in operation at all times, making him

exceptionally sensitive to threats on his life. He could also ignore pain. His senses weren't completely dull, but he felt like he could deal with it later. "I've lived through worse pain than this."

It seemed like he had learned ways to divert his pain in his previous lives. He also had the high-level healing strength of a dhampir and his non-attribute magic Enhanced Healing. Even if he messed this up, he would just get hurt a little. Nothing more. If anything got chopped off, they just had to make sure to pick it back up and stick it back on. The only thing he really needed to be careful about was losing an eye.

"That's why he does things like that," Basdia said, nodding to Vandal standing there with a goblin short spear stuck into his arm.

Hey!

Young master!

"Ghuuuul!"

His friends all panicked, but Vandal was fine. All he had done was use his arm as a shield to block an attack that he decided he couldn't avoid. The Goblin Soldier grinned, trying to pull the spear free, but that was what cost him the fight.

"Hah!" Vandal shouted. With strength that was patently impossible from a three-year-old, Vandal moved his arm easily with the spear still stuck in it, dragging the Goblin Soldier off balance.

"Gyah-gaah?!" the goblin gurgled as Vandal's claws slashed its exposed side. Blood spewed from its wound and mouth, turning the goblin into another corpse rolling on the ground.

"Huh . . . I screwed up," Vandal said, pulling the spear from his arm. He used

Death to Bacteria on it and then healed himself up.

You did more than screw up! What if you got killed? Rita cried.

Bleeding too much can kill you, right? Saria added.

Even the other undead were sounding anxious cries.

“Calm down, everyone. I’m not going to die. I’m fine, I promise,” Vandal assured them.

It’s hard to watch him fight but also hard to get angry with him about it, Basdia thought.

“I’m sorry. I was under attack, and I tripped over one of the bodies on the ground, so I couldn’t get clear. I used my arm as a shield to prevent any more serious damage. Next time I’ll either use the claws to deflect the spear or just kill the monster faster.” Vandal didn’t think he had a choice, even though he knew people who cared about him had difficulty recognizing it.

Basdia realized that scolding him too harshly might cause him to panic. “Okay. Be more careful next time,” she said. Then she gave him some pointers about what he could have done instead.

Vandal knew his fighting technique was lacking. Basdia, Zadilis, and Vigaró all agreed, figuring that if he could polish his technique, he might stop taking quite so many risks.

No one delighted in whittling down their own bodies. Vandal still felt pain. If he could survive without having to lose anything—if he could win—then he would surely choose the path without the pain.

As it turned out, Zadilis and Vigaró had themselves faced situations in which they needed to take risks in order to survive. Zadilis, in particular, had met Vandal when he saved her from one such situation.

“You need to improve your technique, Van,” Basdia said. “Take a quick break and we’ll move on.”

That was why they needed him to pick up the basics quickly now, before things got too serious or difficult to handle.

“. . . We’re going at this at a pretty brisk pace, wouldn’t you say?” Vandal said.

“Not at all,” Basdia replied.

“Can I use magic then?” Vandal countered.

“I thought you wanted muscles, Van? You need to work your body for those.”

“But do I have to fight them head-on? Can’t I surprise them from behind?” he asked.

“That isn’t going to teach you anything. You have to fight!”

Using magic wouldn’t provide martial arts experience, and Vandal wasn’t skilled enough yet to combine the two at the same time. He could rely on his high stats to take out a Goblin Soldier with a single surprise attack, sure, but that wasn’t going to enhance his combat ability.

“Kachia told me that humans say, ‘A woman not only raises her children but also her husband.’ Don’t you worry, Van. I will raise you!” Basdia said. To those present, a man needed to be strong above all else.

“. . . Yeah. Great. Thanks,” Vandal replied. He was the one who had asked for her help with learning Brawling Proficiency, in the hopes of becoming stronger. And he knew that this form of training—basically real combat—was effective.

“It’s okay. You can do it!” Basdia said.

“I’ll try.”

More than anything else, complimenting Vandal worked very well. He needed

to be built up, not torn down.

That day Vandal killed two Goblin Soldiers, one kobolt, two mini needle wolves, and one Goblin Knight, all on his own.

Acquired the skill Brawling Proficiency!



The squealing shrieks of two goblins rang out.

Vandal avoided the sword of the Goblin Soldier and slashed it in the side with his claws. He closed in on the surprised goblin behind the first, grabbing it by the head and snapping its neck.

Now Goblin Archers were attacking him from behind. One of the arrows scraped his cheek, but that wasn't going to kill him. He ignored the incoming fire and charged toward them.

Looking alarmed, one of the Goblin Archers hurriedly switched from bow to dagger, but Vandal hammered it with his Brawling Proficiency battle tech Fist Strike. It was incredibly satisfying to feel the splintering ribs jabbing into the lungs of the goblin through the furs it was wearing. Another Goblin Archer tried for a close-range shot from his blind spot, but Vandal's Detect Danger: Death picked it up. This time he used Kicker, hitting the ground with his foot to leap away.

"Giih?!" the goblin exclaimed. Vandal used Kicker again, dashing in before the goblin could fire a second arrow. This one tried for its sword as well, but it was too late. Vandal kicked out its legs, breaking them, and then snapped its

exposed neck.

“... Phew.” Vandal took a breath, making sure the job was done and checking for other enemies. He caught his breath and then reflected on the fighting. “Skills are really something, huh?”

Using magic-related skills hadn't done much for him, but since learning skills like Brawling Proficiency, Carpentry, and Cookery, he realized how incredible they were.

Vandal had never been trained in combat during either of his previous lives. He might have done some judo at school, but that was about it. He had never fought battles here without using magic either.

Three months of training later, and here he was.

The enemies were Goblin Soldiers and Goblin Archers. They were rank 2 and definitely not strong. Still, while they didn't have any skills, they knew how to fight with their weapons, and they had far greater physical strength than the average person.

And yet he had wiped them out, almost completely one-sidedly, with just a scratch on the cheek. Yesterday, he had barely managed to kill one of them, using his arm as a shield. That was all thanks to skills.

Obtaining skills didn't suddenly provide an incredible boost of mystical power. In the case of Brawling Proficiency, for example, he now understood how to punch quickly and could move his body as was required. When kicking, he knew where to strike to break his enemy's legs and could move his body as required. He knew how to deal with attacks from the enemy, how to avoid them, and how to switch into a counter stance. He understood it all and could move his body as required.

With Carpentry, he knew what to do to build a solid building—for example, where to place the loadbearing pillars and how many were needed. With Cookery, he had a kind of instinctual knowledge of what to combine in order to make delicious food.

Skills really were a wonderful system, created for humans by the gods in order to resist monsters. This was what divine beings could achieve when they did their job. The most incredible thing was how a skill could be represented as a numerical value. On Earth or Ramda, you would need to look at the past deeds of a person or other evidence in order to ascertain their proficiency, but in Ramda you could just show someone your status, and it would cover everything in an instant. Of course, that also opened up the danger of getting pigeonholed solely based on the skills that an individual currently had.

Great work, young master, Saria said.

“Impressive, master,” said the skeleton, bringing him some water.

“Eighty points, Van,” Basdia said, providing a merciless assessment.

“What do I lose points for?” Vandal asked.

“Ten for the arrow to the cheek and another ten for using too many battle techs. I know you don’t have to worry about running out of MP, but using too many battle techs in quick succession can scramble your brains a bit. The same as using too much magic.”

“I see,” Vandal replied. That was the sudden fever he had experienced multiple times. If that happened during combat, he could imagine getting killed without being able to fight back. It wasn’t about mental fortitude. As humans thought using their brains, it was simply an unavoidable issue.

Vandal had more than 100 million MP, but his Intellect was just over 100.

Even with his access to Limit Break, it might be a bad idea to use too many battle techs.

“Okay. Next, I need to learn about combining magic into my fighting,” Vandal said.

Vandal had chosen Brawling Proficiency from among all the fighting styles out there was because it suited him and allowed him to use his claws. Vandal’s body was small, and his arms and legs were short. It didn’t matter how strong he was when the delivery system was bite sized. Most of the weapons he had collected so far were too big for him. The only ones he could use were the dagger, short bow, short spear, and his own claws.

Daggers were easy to carry around, made great hidden weapons, and could even be thrown if the occasion required it. They were also weak, however, and needed speed to use well. Agility was one of Vandal’s lowest stats.

The short bow simply wasn’t going to work for him. Considering its effective range and power output, he was better off using MP Shot.

The short spear, however, was appealing. Despite its length, it still used Spear Technique skills, so he could pick those up now and then switch to a big boy spear once he was a bigger boy. He couldn’t conceal it, but he also wasn’t planning on becoming an assassin.

Ultimately, Vandal selected the claws.

Claws were his own personal weapon, growing from his own hands and feet. He could pop them in and out whenever he pleased, like a cat. They had short range, and he couldn’t shoot them off, but unless he lost a limb, there was no fear of losing his weapons.

There was also the potential for him to have inherited some talent with

Brawling Proficiency from his father, who had been a claw fighter himself. The final factor was that choosing it made Dalshia happy, and Basdia and the ghouls as well.

The young master is growing up into quite the ghoul, Rita said.

Maybe they will start calling him the White Ghoul, Saria suggested.

“Squeak, if he applies Virulent Poison to his claws, that could work,” the skeleton added.

Vandal had a premonition of another new title. No—more like a wanted poster in the adventurers’ guild. He didn’t want a price on his head in the Milg Shield Kingdom.

“That’s it for basic training,” Vandal said. “Now we can work our way through the dungeon while I level up. We’ve almost hunted down all the monsters on this floor anyway.”

They proceeded inside and descended to the second level. Vandal was in the center of the party, with the skeleton and Basdia in front. There was Skeleton Wolf, Skeleton Bear, and Skeleton Monkey out on the sides. Saria and Rita were in the back, having switched from their pole weapons to bows. Skeleton Bird watched from the air.

Garan Valley had floors shaped like natural valleys. That meant that, while there were some places where rocks divided the path, the overall floor compositions were very simple, basically paths with almost no traps along the way. This was one reason it was recommended for beginners.

“Hey! King!”

“Hi! King!”

That was why the black goblins and a giantling undead mentor were also in

here, training like he was.

“How goes it, King?” Braga asked. The goblin had only been alive for six months but was already adult sized.

Vandal looked up at him and smiled. “I’ve learned skills and earned 80 points,” he replied, puffing out his chest.

Braga’s lips lifted in a smile. “You are so small! Well done! Well done, King!” he exclaimed, ruffling Vandal’s hair.

He was being praised, and yet it didn’t sit all that well with him. “I guess this is what it feels like when all your playmates become adults, and you’re still stuck being a child,” he mused, arriving at an uncomfortable truth. “I feel lonely, abandoned, and panicked, all at once.”

“Don’t overthink it, King. I’m a goblin. You’re a dhampir.”

Braga was correct, of course. They were different races, with different speeds of development. Braga was taller at the moment, but as a black goblin he would only come up to the chest of a grown man. In the future, Vandal might be able to look down on Braga . . . potentially.

“How’s your training, Braga?” Vandal asked him, wanting to change the subject.

“I learned a lot of skills. Sword Proficiency, Sneaking Steps, Detect Presence. I’m already over level 80!” Braga said proudly.

“Oh, wow. You’re going to overtake me quickly.” Vandal used Flight to rise up to Braga’s head and patted him in return. “You are a black goblin, after all. Like regular goblins, or kobolts, you mature quickly. This is your time to shine.”

Monsters like black goblins reached maturity in less than one year, meaning they had a serious growth spurt. The more they trained during that period, the

stronger they would eventually become.

“Work hard and rank up,” Vandal told him. “We’ll need you to help with hunting monsters around here, and that won’t be easy otherwise.”

The black goblin was rank 2, but the monsters around Talosheim were mainly rank 3 or higher. Depending on party numbers and gear, he would have trouble maintaining a stable hunt at his current rank.

“You’re strict. But I’ll do my best,” Braga replied, eager to continue his training. If he worked alongside the giantling undead and ghouls, and maybe even gave farming a shot, he would probably be able to eke out a living as he already was. But he was a monster. Monsters wanted to be strong. “Once you finish, we adventure together!”

“Yes. We will adventure,” Vandal replied.

They shared a handshake, and then Braga went back to his lessons. From the look of it, none of the black goblins had any issues with killing the other goblins that appeared in this dungeon.

“They are enemies.” That one expression was all that mattered.

The black goblins and other monsters were using the second and third floors on the way down to train, and so there weren’t many monsters left for Vandal and his own party to fight. But the early floors in this dungeon only had rank 2 monsters anyway, meaning they wouldn’t be worth much experience. Down on the fourth floor, it was the anubis, not the black goblins, that were training.

“Gaaaah!”

“Gaaaah!”

Vandal wasn’t sure which cry came from which, but a baboon-like rank 3 monster and a young anubis carrying a spear were facing off. Both had their

fangs out, threatening the other, but the baboon seemed to decide a fight was inevitable and used its four limbs to climb up the nearby rockface, seeking to take the high ground.

“Raaah!” The young anubis proceeded to dash up the same surface, using just its two feet, and then attacked the baboon with a spear.

The baboon gave a cry as it fell to the ground. The young anubis dropped down as well to stamp on the monster’s neck. Quite the decisive victory.

“Raah! King, what do you think? Do you like how I hunt?” the anubis asked.

“You are very strong,” Vandal replied. “I’m sure you could handle pretty much any other rank 3 monster, Zamed.”

This Anubis had been born around the same time as Braga, but was now also a young adult. His head looked an elegant breed of shepherd dog, while from the neck down he had a tightly toned, tanned body. He was tall and handsome, and from simply his appearance nobody would have thought Vandal was the older of the two.

“No,” Zamed replied, “I still need more training. Rank 3 is too weak for living here. I need to become strong enough to hold my own on the hunt.” If enough weaker monsters banded together, they could defeat much more powerful prey. Zamed seemed to have set his sights pretty high. “There is something I would like to discuss, though. About Memedigga.”

“Something wrong with her?” Vandal asked.

“She’s been wearing a necklace made from monster bones and fangs. I don’t know who gave it to her. When I go looking for her, to talk, I can’t find her. She spends all her time with Belg,” Zamed explained.

“. . . Maybe she’s just reached that certain age?” Vandal suggested. It

sounded like Memedigga had started a relationship with Belg, another anubis. *Not bad for a younger guy*, thought Vandal, although Belg was only younger by about one month. It sounded like girls did grow up faster. *Well, good for her*.

“What? Memedigga wants Belg’s children?!” Zamed exclaimed.

For a moment, Vandal thought maybe he was skipping too many steps with that assumption—but then again, maybe not. This was Ramda, and they were monsters.

“It’s too soon for that! None of us are ready to be parents!”

As a Japanese person raised on Earth, Vandal had to agree with Zamed’s assessment, but the living armor sisters had a different take on things.

Oh, she’ll be fine. Humans get married as soon as they are old enough all the time, Rita said.

Spend too long worrying about it being too soon, and you’ll age out of ever getting married, Saria agreed.

“They’re right,” Basdia offered. “The important thing for a woman is who the father is. If Memedigga wants to have Belg’s child, you need to support her.” That was a succinct assessment of the ghoulish perspective on men and women. The women gave birth to the children and raised them in the grotto. He wasn’t sure how the structure would be received in modern Japan. While fathers had no direct responsibilities to the child, so long as they were also a member of the grotto, they needed to hunt beyond their own needs, meaning there were no freeloaders among the men. That was ghoulish society. Hard on those who couldn’t fight, that was for sure.

This topic of conversation meant nothing to the undead, so they kept patrolling the perimeter. They were more animal than anything and, as such,

unlikely to offer useful advice.

“Do you think so?” Zamed said.

“Maybe suggest they at least wait until Belg can hunt for himself,” Vandal suggested. It looked like the world of Ramda was even harder than Earth for guys over-protective of their sisters.

They made it through the fourth floor without issue, anyway. The liver and kidneys of the baboon monster apparently made great potions, but they didn’t have anyone in a job that could use them. On the fifth floor, the remaining anubis and the remaining rank 3 ghouls were training together.

“Gaaah!”

“Ghuuuuul!”

Shouting their various battle cries, the combined force was taking on a rock python, which looked like a bunch of boulders strung together. This massive snake with rock-like defenses was just more prey for them to hunt. They used viscous magical mud to hold it in place while spears, swords, and claws found the gaps in its skin to finish it off. Rock pythons looked pretty hard, but these monsters were actually tasty when cooked well. The meat became soft, with a flavor like chicken.

“King! Did you see my earth attribute magic?” asked Memedigga, swinging her staff around as she jumped down off the neck. She had used the clinging mud magic that stopped the rock python in place.

“Yes. That was quite something,” Vandal said.

Magic like that didn’t look flashy but could really help out in battle. Earth attribute had a lot of spells like that. Only the greats could do the epic stuff, like making volcanoes erupt, controlling magma, or swallowing their enemies into

crevasses. Most earth magicians relied more on making pit-traps or causing sharp thorns to spring up. From that perspective, Memedigga was making good use of the characteristics of earth magic.

Putting that aside for a moment, Vandal looked up at her again. She had sparkling eyes, perked-up ears, a wet nose, white fangs, and a glossy coat. The rest of her was just as beautiful: her skin, full breasts with a tight waist, and a tail swinging happily from side-to-side. She had always been cute, but now she was a beauty. Vandal had heard that having someone beautiful among your childhood friends made you feel proud, and looking at Memedigga, he understood that sentiment. He also understood why she already had a boyfriend.

“What is it, King?” she asked him.

“No, it’s nothing. I bumped into Zamed on the fourth floor. How are things between you?”

“Not great. He’s been nagging me constantly,” Memedigga said.

Vandal was then treated to perhaps ten minutes of commonplace teenager-style angst.

“. . . I understand he’s worried about me. But he could also trust me a little more.”

“Yes, uh, good point. The two of you should sit down and talk this out. If it’s going to get too heated, have someone else join,” Vandal suggested.

“Okay, I’ll ask Belg—”

“Someone other than him,” Vandal quickly said.

While normal goblins and kobolts couldn’t speak the human tongue, Memedigga, Braga, and the others could barely shut up. That was because the

ghouls and Vandal had taught them. This wasn't a particularly unique phenomenon. Any monster with a degree of intellect that was tamed by a Tamer often picked up language. Still, being able to hold an actual conversation was mostly restricted to humanoid monsters.

After he finished counseling Memedigga, his party left the fifth floor without engaging in much combat. The sixth floor was where things in Garan Valley got serious—from a manufacturing perspective.

The giantling undead were hacking away vigorously at the white walls, chopping out blocks of stone.

“Cut some more out!”

“Raaagh! Stone Cutter!”

These were the stone craftsmen of Talosheim.

White stone could be harvested from the walls and rocks of the sixth floor of Garan Valley. It was a lot like marble from Earth, but since it came from a dungeon, it also contained magical power, making it a higher grade of stone than normal rock. Secret techniques could be applied when working it to make final articles that were harder, tougher, and more resistant to wear than marble. When they began their trade with the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom and Duke Heartner's domain, the giantlings had been surprised by the high price it sold for.

However, there was no such trade, and Vandal had already perfectly repaired the castle, the town, and the walls. There shouldn't have been any demand for this stone.

Nuaza appeared at that moment, carrying a round metal shield and a mace that looked like it could split a man's head like an egg. He had never looked

more like a lich.

“Why, hello. Are you training in the dungeon, Child?”

“Yes. What about you, Nuaza?” Vandal asked.

“We need some stone,” Nuaza replied.

Vandal could use Golem Creation to gather fragments of stone back together, essentially recycling them, but he couldn't create new stone from thin air. But he still wasn't sure what they needed the stone for.

“I didn't make too many reversi sets, did I?” Vandal asked. Reversi made everyone so happy that he got a bit carried away and made more than 100.

“No, Child, that is not problem,” Nuaza said. “When you have a moment, we could actually use . . . 100 more?”

The reversi, Jenga, and frisbees that Vandal had made had really taken off in Talosheim. People were so starved for entertainment that they didn't even realize what they were missing, but the games also caught on because the rules were so simple. All three were just pick up and play. In fact, owning a set of these games was becoming something of a status symbol. Vandal was even a little worried that things might be going too far. Still, he wasn't being paid, and the sets were easy to make, so it didn't seem worth spending time worrying about.

“Some more Jenga and frisbees would be welcome too,” Nuaza added.

“Do you really need me for that?” Vandal asked. Anyone could make a Jenga set or frisbee.

“That they are made by you is very important, Child,” Nuaza replied.

The toys that had been handmade by Vandal were like medals of honor to the

undead. He hardly saw them as anything so grand, but it seemed he had quite a brand.

“Very well,” Vandal said. If the toys made them so happy, he could churn out a few more. He wasn’t paying the giantling undead or ghouls a salary. Giving them some kind of reward seemed justified. “So, what do you need the stone for?”

“The square in front of the castle is a little bleak, don’t you agree? We have decided to build a statue there,” Nuaza explained.

“A statue. That sounds nice.”

Art enriched the mind. The undead tended to put a lot of weight on thoughts and feelings, which meant keeping them psychologically stable was important.

“Indeed. We hope to have a stone statue of you erected before springtime comes, Child,” Nuaza said gleefully.

“... Seriously?” Vandal eventually managed.

“Seriously. You are the Oracle Child. For those like us, who desire the restoration of Goddess Vida, you are an object of our faith.”

“Is it too late to choose the shut-in life?” Vandal mused. He didn’t mind them being friendly with him, but jumping right to an “object of faith” felt like too big a leap. Of course, he didn’t have “Oracle Child” printed across his face, so once he reached Olbaum he could just keep his mouth shut.

I can’t wait to see it, young master! Rita enthused.

Nobles always have paintings and statues of themselves. No need to get upset about it, Saria assured him.

“What about statues in the square in front of a castle? Many nobles have one

of those?” Vandal replied.

That quickly shut them down. Or it appeared to, from the limited available visual clues. The sisters were pretty expressive, considering they didn’t have faces.

“Ah! No noble does! Squeak! That makes you master of this world!” The skeleton sounded very happy for him. “Congratulations!”

Not that it mattered, Vandal reflected. It wasn’t like anyone was coming to Talosheim. The only ones who would see it were the giantling undead, the ghouls, and the new breeds.

“We need to get this stone out of here,” Nuaza said. “Then we will take our leave.”

With that, the giantlings started the work of transporting the stone. They would have to protect literally tons of stone from attacking monsters on the way up. The monsters wouldn’t be attacking the stone specifically, but unexpected attacks could easily crack or damage it.

Gobba and the other orcas were along to help prevent that from happening.

“Fugofugo!”

“We will protect the stone for king statue.”

“Make us reversi too.”

Unlike the anubis and black goblins, the orcas weren’t fully grown yet, but they had the skills and physical abilities to handle enemies up to around rank 3. That made this the perfect training for them.

“I’ll make you some once I’m done here,” Vandal assured them. “What about the stairs, though? Isn’t it hard to get the stone out of here?”

“Have no fear!” Nuaza assured him. “We’ve got some tricks up our sleeves.”

That included magic items to turn the stairways into slopes. The giantlings had been freed from exhaustion by becoming undead. The orcas were still kids but also had Brute Strength. There was nothing to worry about.

They parted ways with Nuaza and continued onward. Most of the monsters on this floor had been wiped out in order to allow the stone cutting to proceed unhindered, so almost no monsters attacked them here either.

“What did we come in here for again? Overseeing others at work?” Vandal said.

“I understand your feelings, Van,” Basdia assured him, “but there are surely more monsters below us. Let us continue.”

The seventh floor of Garan Valley. Here lay the reason a population of more than 5,000 giantlings had been able to build a nation and flourish here.

“Rock salt! Mine the rock salt!”

“Any monsters to worry about?”

“Nothing at the moment!”

This was the floor where quality rock salt could be obtained. Salt was a vital resource. An absolute necessity. And Talosheim had relied on this dungeon for their entire supply. Pinned in on all sides by the mountains and their demon barrens, until the tunnel to the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom had been discovered, Talosheim had been unable to trade with other nations. Reaching the sea meant crossing multiple wild demon barrens.

So, the seventh floor of Garan Valley was their only hope of obtaining salt in

any quantity. If the giantlings hadn't found this place, then only a few hundred giantlings could've eked out a living—Talosheim would not have existed.

Of course, as the interior of a dungeon, monsters appeared here. There were rock monkeys, huge primates with rock-like skin. There were kobolts, including Mages that used magic and Kobolt Generals who used battle techs. Then there were huge stone golems, bigger than even the giantlings. All of these would need reasonably established adventurers in order to handle them. The approach the giantlings had adopted in order to harvest the rock salt was therefore a simple one: have the laborers become as strong as established adventurers.

"You can't stop the salt train!" shouted a giantling.

The sight of them fighting off monsters, armed with pickaxes and wearing full armor, had apparently been so impressive that the adventurers from Olbaum who came as back-up felt completely unneeded. Becoming undead had done nothing to quench the giantlings' fire.

"Raaagh! Miso! More ingredients for miso!"

"I want fish sauce!"

"Any monsters that get in the way, we cook them with salt and miso!"

Indeed, they seemed even more invigorated, considering they were dead.

The idea that undead didn't eat was a common misconception. Lower-ranking skeletons and ghosts didn't need food, true, and couldn't taste anything. But zombies and higher-ranking undead got hungry and could taste what they ate. Of course, their functions as living creatures were permanently halted, so they didn't require food. They could go without it for years at a time and it made no difference. But they also couldn't escape completely from their previous

existence as biological beings. That primal hunger remained.

Out of the three primal urges, sleep was the one that went away altogether. Undead didn't feel exhaustion, meaning they didn't need to sleep. If they wanted to sleep, they could do something pretty close, but they only did it for the purpose of recovering from mental exhaustion and for a sense of satisfaction, not out of any physical need.

Sexual desire remained, but very faintly. Their bodies were dead, meaning they had no desires to leave offspring behind, but they might engage in the act in order to drain lifeforce from a living creature, or if they had died with a strong fixation on sex.

The one that remained in its entirety was hunger. This urge, burning in the soul, drove the undead to action. It made zombies eat flesh, slurp blood, and absorb the magical power contained within to earn experience. When skeletons and other Spirit Body-type undead reached a high rank, they could use Spirit Body skills to create temporary physical forms, then use those to consume the flesh of their victims or just drain off their vitality. The giantling undead of Talosheim were no exception, and they had eaten a lot since being turned—mainly the monsters that entered the city, but sometimes plants or tree bark, and at times even fragments of stone.

With the arrival of Vandal, they had started to eat food with real flavors. Meat on skewers, baked wrapped in leaves or with walnut and basil sauce. The fish sauce, walnut miso, and chestnut miso that Vandal had made left a particular impression. These were condiments that the Hero Zakkato had tried and failed to recreate, so they didn't exist on Ramda. The taste had proven to be quite the culture-shock. New fans were born with every mouthful.

“Miso! Miso! Miso!”

“Fish sauce! Fish sauce!”

“My head hurts! I’m hallucinating! Give me miso, give me miso!”

Vandal was willing to admit that things might have gone too far.

“Van, is that condiment you made addictive somehow?” Basdia asked.

“No. At least, I don’t think so,” he replied, but he was creeping farther away from the sight of these giantling undead going crazy to find more rock salt. Even Vandal’s impressive poker face couldn’t hide his lack of confidence in that reply. “I thought I was making it the same way they do on Earth. No one on Origin told me that fermented products made using death attribute magic was addictive. Maybe I just wasn’t aware? Or maybe the walnuts and acorns I’ve been using contains some substance with strange side effects.”

Dad said they were delicious as well. I think you’ve just made good food, Saria assured him. Her observations were based on Sam recently having increased his own Spirit Body skill level, which allowed him to taste the miso himself.

It’s not fair! I want to eat too! Rita complained.

The living armor didn’t have heads, mouths, or anything else. They couldn’t eat or taste anything yet.

“I don’t know,” Vandal said. “Barige, the one complaining about his head hurting, has seen hallucinations for some time, so I’m told.”

“That’s worrying,” Basdia said. “Is Barige okay?”

“I don’t know. I also heard his hands shook when he sobered up, even when he was alive. I don’t think there’s anything we can do.”

Don’t lose yourself in drink, Rita said.

“Let’s all be careful with beverages,” Vandal summarized.

They moved past the rock-salt mining giantling undead and decided to camp the rest of the day on the seventh floor.

Dungeon exploration closer to Vandal's expectations began on the eighth floor.

No one else was training here, and no giantling undead were mining for stone or rock salt, so they maintained a regular encounter rate with monsters. With the simple structure of Garan Valley, the only way to hide from monsters would be to put together a party of nothing but scouts or use illusions for concealment.

Young master! I thought it was a stone monkey, but it's just a stone golem! Saria reported.

"This one is tough," Basdia said. "Anything you can do with your Golem Creation, Van?"

"No. I can only control golems that I made myself. Let's have Bone Monkey and the gang handle this," Vandal suggested.

At the orders, the undead bellowed and charged.

Starting on the eighth floor, Vandal's party started to encounter multiple rank 3 monsters at once. These ranged from golems, simply appearing in larger numbers but acting on their own, to clusters of Kobolt Knights and Kobolt Archers that worked in concert. All this greatly increased the difficulty compared to the previous floors.

Bone Monkey smashed the stone golem with a grunt. Regular adventurers would have had trouble with it, for sure. Maybe rank D adventurers could've won by using battle techs but doing that required magical power. Adventurers

didn't have enough to throw that around.

From that perspective, Vandal and his party were overpowered for Garan Valley. Everyone other than himself was rank 4, and he could always rely on his vast pool of magical power to strongarm any obstacles. They couldn't struggle in here if they wanted to.

"Phew. It feels nice to earn some experience, after two years," Vandal said.

Still, it wasn't worth risking one's life just to earn some experience. This set-up was fine.

"Squeak, what level are you, master?" the skeleton asked.

"Let's see . . . I'm not even 10 yet," Vandal replied.

At the same time, he wasn't receiving that much experience from this training. He was currently in the Death Mage Job, and levels were proving difficult to come by. "What about you, Basdia?"

"I changed from Apprentice Warrior to Warrior before we came down here, and now I'm level 14," she said.

"Hmmm. Let's have a chat with Borkz once we get back to Talosheim," Vandal suggested. Borkz would know about any differences in the experience required to raise the level for different jobs. He had lost his job after becoming undead, but when he was alive he must have started from Apprentice numerous times and worked his way up to Sword King through multiple jobs. This was all 200 years ago, of course, so his memories on the subject might be fragmented. "My stats are increasing, although slowly," Vandal said. "No need to rush things."

How much? Rita asked.

"From 1 to 10 points, depending on the stat. Maybe about 2% for my MP."

Then we have a long road ahead, Rita said.

“Still, that’s more than two million MP. Pretty impressive,” Basdia said.

They continued to work their way through the oncoming horde of monsters. Vandal was careful not to strike the final blow himself; the “unable to personally acquire experience” curse really was a pain.

Despite the curse, the conditions that allowed him to earn experience from his allies and minions were starting to become clearer. The basic condition was that the individual in question earned experience in a place where Vandal could see it happen. However, when he had borrowed the perspective of the Skeleton Bird and watched a monster killed from afar, he didn’t earn any experience. He needed to see it with his own eyes. They didn’t have binoculars or telescopes here on Ramda, from what Vandal had seen, but he wondered if looking through one of those would count. Probably not.

What about corrective lenses, then? There was apparently a magic item in the shape of glasses that let you see a long distance. If he ever got a pair, he decided to try it out. It was important to figure out the importance of his own eyes. He didn’t know how to make binoculars, so he couldn’t test those.

“Maybe I could create a lens by making a golem from glass?” Vandal pondered. “Something with a low degree of magnification might still be possible.”

“Van! Don’t get distracted in the middle of battle!” Basdia shouted.

“It’s fine. I’m almost finished.”

The enemy monster screeched in death. Every now and then, Vandal did strike the final blow, in order to also increase his Brawling Proficiency skill. They eventually reached the tenth floor, the lowest in Garan Valley.

“Grrrrrrah!”

The roar came from a rock gorilla, even bigger than the giantlings, baring its fangs. It pounded on its thick breastplate with massive fists, drumming out a warning. It was rank 4, but in the higher echelons. It didn’t have any special abilities, but it was as hard and as brutally powerful as it looked, while also smart and able to use a number of earth attribute spells.

All of that being said . . .

“This seems pretty weak for a rank D dungeon boss?” Vandal commented.

“I was thinking the same thing. It’s probably a mid-boss,” Basdia confirmed.

Perhaps the rock gorilla understood that the two of them were casting aspersions on its abilities because it gave a short belch and charged at them, moving on all fours with unexpected speed.

Bone Monkey rushed in the way of the gorilla, grunting. One bone primate and one rock primate clashed together and strained against each other. Bone Monkey groaned, his bones creaking. They were equal when it came to pure strength, but Bone Monkey was comprised of bones and a slight Spirit Body, while the rock gorilla had flesh and a hard shell.

The rock gorilla guffawed, feeling assured of its victory. But within an instant it was grunting in pain, as its smile was bathed in poisonous breath from Bone Monkey. The poison entered its eyes and nose, those areas unprotected by its rocky shell. It pushed Bone Monkey away, covering its face.

“Graaaaah!”

“Ghouuuul!”

Yaaaaah!

That was pretty much the end of it. The rock gorilla was a powerful rank 4 monster facing eight other rank 4 monsters. Basdia didn't even have to do anything, and it was more of a lynching than it was a fight.

The rock gorilla would have fared better if it had kept its distance and mainly fought using earth attribute magic. But it had a violent nature, perhaps due to the dungeon setting, so it sought close combat.

Once they finished off the rock gorilla, Vandal used Detox to remove the poison from the body and then collected the magic stones. The meat had a strong flavor but made a good soup when boiled with herbs, and so he cast Death to Bacteria and Death to Bugs on the organs and used them to make lunch. The gorilla's rock shell increased defenses when used in armor, and so he planned to take that along with them too.

He cast Maintain Freshness on the recovered materials and turned them into flesh golems so they could move on their own. In this way, Vandal's party remained light and unencumbered in the dangerous dungeon. Having to keep the flesh golems from being eaten by monsters did increase the tasks on hand, but they had plenty of hands to keep busy.

"Let's head deeper," Vandal said.

Garan Valley was previously a ten-floor, rank D dungeon, shallow and easy. But, perhaps due to having been left alone for 200 years, it had gained an extra three floors. That also led to the phenomenon of mid-bosses.

Dungeons with eleven floors or more had a final boss, plus mid-bosses along the way. They generally appeared every ten floors and were stronger than normal monsters but not as strong as the final boss. So, for example, if a dungeon had 27 floors, there would be mid-bosses on floors 10 and 20, and the final boss on 27.

It was common for a party of adventurers exploring a new dungeon to fight a powerful monster, and think it was the boss, only to defeat it and find more stairs rather than a treasure chest. That “boss” had only been the mid-boss, regardless of how tough it had been.

“Borkz told me that defeating the mid-boss bumps the difficulty up,” Vandal warned. “Keep your wits about you.”

“Okay!” came his party’s reply. Bracing for whatever was going to happen next, they headed down to floor 11.

From 11 onward, they started to see rank 4 monsters with some rank 3 in tow. There were packs of Kobolt Knights led by a Kobolt Mage, and rock monkeys following a rock gorilla. All of them could fight well in coordination. Once they reached floor 13, rank 4 monsters started to show up in groups as well. That was where the going got tougher for Vandal and his party.

When a pack of hellhounds appeared, spitting fire breath from long range, Vandal knew it was going to waste some experience and materials, but he fired off MP Shot spells to thin out the herd a little. When a cluster of rock golems rumbled over, everyone unleashed as many battle techs as they needed, and then Vandal used Magical Power Transfer to restore their MP.

They also started encountering traps that triggered falling rocks. Vandal didn’t hesitate to use magic to stop these. Traps wouldn’t turn into experience anyway. Vandal’s party also started to do better in terms of loot, especially from the more dungeon-like treasure chests that had started to appear.

Vandal was examining one of these treasures, a weapon of forged steel. From the hilt it was clear to see that it was a human-sized broadsword, not a giantling-sized one.

“Even though this dungeon is close to Talosheim, the weapons from the chests are all human sized,” he said.

There had been few races apart from giantlings in this region for 100,000 years. It seemed strange to him, but Basdia, who had visited these dungeons a number of times already, had an answer.

“This is my first time coming this deep in here, but apparently it isn’t a rare phenomenon,” she explained. Adventurers’ experiences suggested that the contents of the chests were influenced by the ones who opened the chests and the parties accompanying them.

Of course, that didn’t mean the dungeon knew what the adventurers wanted and prepared just the right item. It was more about the size and general specs of the items roughly lining up. That meant that if a party contained only giantlings, giantling weapons and armor would appear. On the other hand, if the party was comprised completely of dwarves, who didn’t even come up to a human’s chest, then gear more suited to their size would appear instead. A party of dwarves would never open a chest to find some giantling armor, and vice versa.

There were a number of theories about why. Some thought that the Demon and Devil Gods that created the dungeons made this adjustment in order to keep adventurers thirsty for loot. Others believed Rekrent, the Demon God of Time and Magic who turned the dungeons into places of training for humans, made this adjustment so that his wards wouldn’t lose interest in improving themselves.

“I guess a bunch of random junk wouldn’t really be much of an incentive to continue,” Vandal said. “I could see people losing interest in that case. Well, the system suits us, so I’m not complaining.” He gave the steel sword to a flesh

golem to carry.

When they reached the boss chamber at the bottom of floor 13, they were confronted by an Orc General and four Orc Knights.

“I thought we were in for a rockier welcome than this,” Vandal quipped.

What do you want to do, young master? Saria asked.

Apparently, Vandal’s deadpan delivery failed to sell the pun.

“Sorry, I guess that wasn’t clear,” Vandal replied. “We’re here to kill their asses.”

They had killed a whole bunch of orcs just last winter, so the party wasn’t thrilled at this development. The Orc General wasn’t aware of this history and flew into a rage, staking the pride of the dungeon on the battle, but it ended with an easy win for Vandal and his party.

“Well, rank 5 gives good experience, and the meat from them is good too. I’ve been wanting to make some lard, so it’s solid timing,” Vandal said. “That pack of hell hounds was harder though, weren’t they?”

“Indeed,” Basdia said.

They gathered the treasure from the chest—not completely worthless—but the mood had certainly cooled off. A number of parties of giantling undead and ghouls had already cleared this place multiple times, and no one had come home with anything to . . . write home about.

Each of the dungeons in Talosheim had also been outfitted, more than 200 years ago, with dungeon-exclusive teleportation devices from the adventurers’ guild. These allowed the party to return to the surface safely with the dungeon’s treasure. Some dungeons allowed parties to return to the surface from multiple floors along the way or return to floors they had already visited

from the surface.

What a convenient world they were living in.

Basdia became rank 5 Ghoul Amazon!

After returning to Talosheim, Vandal took a bath with the ghouls in the castle.

“How was the dungeon, boy?” Zadilis asked.

“It went very well, Mother.” Basdia answered for him. “Van can now handle a Kobolt Knight without having to use magic.”

The mixed bathing situation had come about because Vigaro let Vandal’s prior underwater exploits slip. Everyone became worried about letting Vandal bathe alone, and now he had to always be accompanied into the baths. Vigaro or Borkz normally handled this task, but they were off having their own dungeon adventures at that moment.

Both of his current companions were aware of Vandal’s prior lives and that his total age put him into his forties, but maybe ghouls didn’t get embarrassed about the same things because neither woman seemed concerned by being here.

I mean, I look three years old, and physically that’s actually how old I am, so I’m not really feeling anything myself, Vandal thought. Here he was, sharing a bath with a beautiful woman and a beautiful girl. If he was back on Earth, he either wouldn’t have been able to keep his eyes off them, gotten so excited his nose exploded in a fountain of anime blood, or been too shy to even steal a glance.



After leaving the dungeon, Basdia had suddenly ranked up to Ghoul Amazon. It wasn't a race anyone in the grotto had achieved before, but Vandal definitely thought it suited her. It boosted stats that were most suited to a warrior. The conditions were likely reaching monster level 100 along with certain levels of a variety of combat skills. She didn't look all that different from before, but she did have some new red patterning across her body. It formed lines that almost looked like tattoos, and definitely looked like magic. They made her look fiercer and bolder. They also accented her incredible curves.

Zadilis looked young but was pretty stacked too . . . Vandal presumed. He couldn't say for sure, with the eyes of a three-year-old. He knew was she cute and pretty, but his physical form influenced his mental state. The only thought he had about either of them was, "Well, she's naked." There was no excitement or rush of blood.

He wasn't even meant to be aware of the world around him at this age, and probably had a few years before he even started thinking about things like "first crush." He wasn't concerned about his lack of feelings. In ten years' time, however, he might regret not having taken a better mental picture.

"You've made great progress, Vandal," Zadilis said.

"He has," Basdia said. "His skills are still level 1, but that's because he isn't getting any modifiers from his job. His magic seems stronger than before too."

"I hear you also ranked up," Zadilis said. From the look of you, you've picked up something magical. Can you finally do some spells?"

"I'm a Ghoul Amazon. I've got Resist Magic now, thanks to these patterns. I don't know what other effects they might have. Magic, well . . . I'll think about

that after I have a child.”

“Hey, does that mean you want a magic item?” Vandal chimed in. A three-year-old, casually taking part in a conversation about having kids. “One of those would really increase your chances of getting pregnant.”

The spread of Vandal’s magic items had helped make progress with the infertility issue, but it was too soon to call the situation resolved. If things went too well and they ended up with too many kids, that could also be a problem. There were no kindergartens on Ramda.

However, Basdia’s face clouded over at his question.

“It still isn’t working. I’ve been wearing one, and my partner too,” she explained.

All the magic item did was increase the active time for the egg and the sperm, raising them to the levels of a regular human and allowing for a similar rate of conception. They didn’t guarantee pregnancy—nothing of the sort. From that perspective, there was nothing suspicious about her failure to get pregnant yet. Healthy human couples still sometimes took a while.

“Shall I give you a Spirit Body checkup? Just to be sure,” Vandal said.

It also didn’t write off the possibility of something being wrong. It couldn’t hurt to check her out when he had a moment.

“Thank you. Yes, please,” Basdia said.

“No problem. I promised to stay in town for a week after getting back from the dungeon, and I’m going to have to make more reversi sets later today.”

Rules had been put in place to prevent Vandal from getting overworked again.

“Good,” Zadilis said. “You are keeping your promise to me, in more ways than

one.”

The Death Mage

CHAPTER FIVE

DARING THE DUNGEONS

Chapter Five: Daring the Dungeons

“I’d love a latte right now,” Vandal sighed. That was only normal for a Japanese person after a bath, and even all the years between then and now didn’t change it. Apparently, they did have coffee here on Ramda, but it wasn’t a major beverage, and only enjoyed by certain rich folks.

Rich. Celebrity. Bourgeois. That only made him want to drink it more. Maybe he could find a coffee plant growing somewhere. As he sat, cooling himself with a fan golem that he built, Vandal remembered his own homemade dandelion coffee.

“I wonder if that would work here?” Vandal pondered. “If I spot some, I’ll have to give it a try.”

On Earth, his uncle had gone through a period of declaring coffee a luxury, so Vandal hadn’t been able to drink it. He had read about the dandelion variant in a book about edible urban plants in the school library, so he’d tried it out. It had been pretty good, too. Worth recommending to his friends here.

“I’d better get moving, anyway,” Vandal said. “Stop spinning.”

The golem ceased spinning on his orders, and then Vandal left the changing room in order to inspect Basdia’s body.

The dandelion coffee that he made a few days later didn’t turn out to be all that delicious. The plants were too different from the ones on Earth, so it didn’t take off in Talosheim. However, the wooden fan golem he created, capable of executing simple commands like spinning its blades, changing speeds (between one of three settings), and rotating its head, quickly became a sensation.

“I’ll start the diagnosis,” Vandal said.

“Yes, thank you,” Basdia replied.

She was lying on her side on the bed, not wearing a white gown but covered in a white blanket. Vandal proceeded to insert his Spirit Bodification arms inside her. It was his first time using this approach with Basdia, but he had done it many times with other ghouls.

She just ranked up. Her body is in top condition, Vandal noted. There were no issues with her blood, circulation, or major organs. Everything was working perfectly. No issues in her womb, such as lesions, inflammation, or disease. It was looking like she just hadn’t got lucky yet, or a little stress was playing a role. He decided to check her ovaries just to make sure.

Hmmm. There’s something strange here, he noticed. Something definitely felt out of place.

“What’s wrong, Van? You’ve stopping moving your hands.”

Basdia was already putting up with the strange feeling of his limbs moving around inside her, so she noticed his hesitation.

“Hmmm. I need to check this more carefully. Let me know if it feels uncomfortable,” Vandal said. Then he started a focused exam of her ovaries.

He normally sensed vitality from the ovaries or testes of his patients, in the form of a powerful heat. Touching healthy examples with his Spirit Body almost felt like they were burning him, sometimes, but in Basdia’s case, there was no heat at all.

Are her ovaries dead? No, it’s not that bad. But they aren’t functioning normally.

After confirming that there were no lesions and no disease, Vandal reflected

on the knowledge he had acquired on Earth and on Origin.

There was a researcher who said my death attribute magic had helped out in the field of gynecology, Vandal recalled. A man Vandal had hated, who was always muttering to himself but flew into a rage when Vandal failed to hear what he said. *Never mind, who cares about his personality.*

Abortion, contraception, preventing STDs . . . ah, infertility treatment. Vandal remembered cases of death attribute magic being used to treat infertility. He was already doing something like that with the magic items for the ghouls. Solutions included keeping eggs and sperm viable for longer or using Rejuvenation on eggs. On the other hand, there were some symptoms that death attribute magic had more trouble dealing with. That's where Basdia's issues fell: her eggs couldn't be fertilized because her ovaries didn't allow them to sufficiently mature.

In this case, Vandal thought, someone with an affinity for life attribute magic would have a better chance of curing her. The best thing to do was use life attribute to activate her ovaries, but Vandal had no affinity for such magic. Luckily, Talosheim did have others who did, such as Nuaza. Vandal could ask him to try, but he had no idea of his level of medical knowledge.

Knowledge and imagination had a powerful effect on magic users. If a Magician from a tropical nation and one from a tundra nation both used magic to make ice, the one from the cold climate would make the better icicle. In the same way, magic had a hard time working on organs if the caster didn't understand how the organs worked. Vandal could try and share his knowledge with Nuaza, but this was more complex than mathematics or language. It might take a while to get the message across.

"Okay," Vandal decided. "I'll give it a try, and if it doesn't work, I'll ask Nuaza,"

“Huh? Ask Nuaza what—uhn, aah, uhahn!” Basdia moaned.

Vandal’s method was roundabout and had a lot of steps. Basically, he needed to absorb the negative elements from the ovaries, then provide his own Vitality to make the ovaries function normally. It would be difficult to control the operation with life magic, but it would only need to be performed once. Using death magic, Vandal had to cast the magic dozens of times. It would have taken over an hour without the Skip Incantation skill.

Vandal groaned. Even using Limit Break, his forehead was burning, and complaints rose in the corners of his mind. *That’s triggered my Limit Break. I wish I had three brains. At least two.*

“I’m feeling something warm,” Basdia said uneasily.

“That’s my Rapid Healing skill and some Enhanced Healing,” Vandal told her. He was providing vitality by merging his Spirit Bodification arms with her body, making his own body think she was a part of him, and in the process activating his Rapid Healing skill. At the same time, he was also using some non-attribute Enhanced Healing magic.

After about ten minutes, the Rapid Healing finished. That suggested he had healed her. Now both her left and right ovaries were burning with Vitality. He wasn’t sure if he had fixed the problem completely or just put a temporary patch on it, but she should be fine for at least a month.

“That’s the end of the treatment. Let’s see how it goes,” Vandal said.

“You’re done?” Basdia replied, her voice shaking a little. “Thank you.” There was sweat on her body, but she gave a relaxed sigh. Similar to when he used Rejuvenation on Zadilis, it didn’t seem like having his Spirit Body probing around inside her was an especially pleasant experience.

“I’ll give you another check-up in a month,” Vandal said. “If anything happens before then, let me know.” He was starting to feel like a real doctor, saying things like that.

Then his stomach rumbled. He had used a lot of magical power and a lot of his strength.

“I’m hungry too. I’ll make something. We brought back a lot of ingredients from the dungeon,” Basdia said.

“Thank you.”

It was a few months since he turned three years old, but Vandal still wasn’t allowed to use fire when cooking, even with his Cookery skill.



Vandal opened the wooden lid and carefully lifted her out.

He used Detox, and then wiped her smooth skin with a damp cloth, careful not to damage it. Death to Bacteria might remove bacteria, but it didn’t remove dust.

Sam had a puzzled expression on his face. *Young master, whatever are you doing?*

“As you can see. I’m doing some hand care for Zandia,” Vandal replied, continuing to care for the only part of Zandia he had—her left hand. “Look at you, though, Sam. You’ve become so expressive.”

Not so long ago, Sam’s Spirit Body was a white, misty figure sitting in the driver’s seat of his carriage. The horses had also been nothing but cloudy horse

shapes. None of them had been capable of anything close to an expression. But now that he had increased his Spirit Body skill level, at a glance, he looked entirely human—excepting the pale blue skin and sparkling red eyes. Every hair on his head was realistically recreated. If he wore a hat pulled down, he could pass as a living person with a sickly pallor.

The same went for the horses. Ignoring their sparkling red eyes, they looked like normal horses. Well, a bit more terrifying than that, but they still looked like living animals.

Yes, young master, Sam said. Thank you. But why are you caring for the limb so carefully? I could understand if she were all there, and undead, but it looks like . . . just a wrist?

Vandal took great care of the hand, further applying Maintain Freshness to prevent decay.

“If I treat it badly, she’ll get angry when we meet,” Vandal said.

If Zandia had become an intelligent undead, she wouldn’t be pleased to find out her hand had been treated poorly once found. That was why Vandal kept her severed appendage safe and cared for.

Hearing this, Sam gave a relieved sigh. *I see. For a moment, I thought maybe you were a man with a certain attachment to specific parts of the female anatomy.*

“No. I don’t have a hand fetish,” Vandal replied plainly. That was quite the misunderstanding. Vandal had no such proclivities.

I see. Noble types can have all sorts of strange tastes, and so I thought it prudent to ask, Sam stated. It sounded like the rich folk in this world had a lot going on.

Father, the young master clearly prefers muscles, Saria said.

The problem being, Rita lamented, that we don't have hands or muscles. Only gauntlets.

At that, Dalshia suddenly appeared. *Speaking of nobles, there's something I'd like to confirm, she said.*

"Mom, I don't think I want you weighing in on this exact topic—"

"That's not what this is about," Dalshia assured him. "I need to say something about nobles, seeing as you want to become one."

Vandal breathed a sigh of relief.

"Basdia said she wants to have a child with you once you grow up. Are you serious about that?"

He had breathed a sigh of relief too soon.

"It does seem like it will happen," Vandal admitted. He couldn't talk directly about things like sexual desire and love, but give it another few decades and he expected he'd be different. He liked Basdia, she was definitely hot, and it didn't feel bad to have her wanting him. They were different races, but Vandal was mixed race himself. There seemed to be no issues with the two of them having children, and so he couldn't think of any reason to turn her down. He had fantasies of a warm homelife as well, after all.

Don't get the wrong idea, Dalshia said. I think Basdia is a nice person. She's tough, too. I know she'll protect you.

". . . Okay." Part of Vandal wanted to protest, but considering his infant body and the body of the Ghoul Amazon Basdia, he let it slide.

If you want to become a noble, though, I think some people won't look kindly

on it, Dalshia continued. Things will be far better in the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom than the Amidd Empire, but there are still plenty of people who don't like dhampirs.

It sounded like Dalshia was worried about complications to him becoming a noble. Thinking about it seriously, it made sense that having a child with a ghoul—who were considered monsters by human society—could cause issues. There were plenty of people back on Earth who went looking for smoke even when there was no fire. Not to mention he couldn't expect everyone to like dhampirs to begin with.

There's also the question of inheritance, Saria said.

Having children meant forming a line of succession. Nobles passed titles down the line, after all. Even Olbaum might not accept a mixed dhampir-ghoul as Vandal's successor. Of course, even if Vandal became a noble, neither he nor Basdia would necessarily think to send their child to live as a noble in human society, but just having that possibility would be enough to stir up trouble.

But Vandal did have an idea on this account. It wasn't something he had considered or investigated yet, but he floated it anyway.

"About that," Vandal said. "I'm thinking of changing trajectory a little and becoming an honorary noble."

An honorary noble? You mean, single generation, with no inheritance? Dalshia said.

That would be correct, Sam confirmed. A title often given to the brightest among the nobility but who are also second sons or younger, and so unable to succeed the family line.

Honorary nobles also didn't generally get any lands. Apart from perhaps a

stipend, they were a noble in name only. But that was exactly the kind of position that suited Vandal.

Is that all you really require, young master? Rita asked. *I mean, it would still be a big step up for a regular person.*

You get money each year, perhaps equal to a few years' worth of ordinary wages, but a full noble makes a lot more than that, Saria said.

That pretty much summarized the general treatment of an honorary noble. There were plenty of stories of people working hard to become nobles, only to end up as honorary ones.

“That’s all I need,” Vandal said. “I don’t want land or a posting or a title to hand down. Getting a yearly stipend and being a noble for one generation suits me far better.”

He definitely didn’t need territory. He had no understanding of how to be a landowner. He could find some trustworthy accomplices to run everything for him, but that wouldn’t be easy. He simply saw any such land going to waste—although, if he didn’t have any people living there, he could probably use Golem Creation to get some things done.

As for a posting, that would be too much for him as well. He had lived for a total of forty years, but he had little experience in human society. He might be able to learn how to succeed, but it didn’t sound like much fun.

As for succession, he considered that to be out of the question the moment he found out about the lifespan of dhampirs. If he was going to live for 3,000 years, so long as he didn’t get killed, he wasn’t going to be passing anything down anytime soon. That was why he had settled on an honorary noble: No territory, posting, or succession, and yet everyone had to treat him as a noble. It

also sounded like a lower bar to clear.

“I want to become a noble so that when the others are born here from Origin, I’ll be in a position that makes them hesitate to kill me. I also want the financial power to live a comfortable life. So, I don’t care if I’m a true noble or an honorary one, so long as people respect me,” Vandal explained.

How will you make your money? Sam asked.

“As a regular old adventurer. I’ll be counting on you to help out with that.”

Just looking at the materials they had collected from Garan Valley, they could make a pretty penny selling them to an adventurers’ guild. If he could make this much money at three years old, he figured he’d be able to do better than some nobles once he was older, so long as he kept working hard.

“Also, if I’m only an honorary noble then it will be easy to give the title back,” Vandal said.

What? Sam exclaimed. *You want to return it?*

“Yes. Once I’ve settled things with the others who are going to be born here, I need to consider that possibility.”

For him, even the title was just a means to an end. It would be convenient to be a noble, sure. Swinging all that power and authority around would probably feel good, and there were delicacies that only nobles could eat, high-class stores only they could frequent, and works of art only they could see. However, he had to consider that the problems might outweigh such benefits. What if he couldn’t spend time with Basdia, the other ghouls, Sam, and the undead? Or if he got caught up in a prolonged power struggle?

It was simple. Once a tool had finished its job, you gave it back.

“If I owned territory then I might have people to care for, which would mean I

couldn't just irresponsibly give it all up," Vandal said. "But as an honorary noble, I won't have any responsibilities. I can give it back, then go into hiding for 100 years or so and let things calm down."

Sam and the others were shocked to hear all this. This indicated just how special nobles were considered in this world. They were the same humans, yet they were treated as though they were a completely different class of being. Indeed, there were numerous nobles who claimed that exact thing.

You made some good points, Vandal, Dalshia said. *I had no idea you were giving this so much thought!* She had been raised in a dark elf village, also removed from the noble system, which had given her a more disassociated perspective.

But for Sam and his daughters, who had served a noble while they were alive, Vandal's opinions were a complete shock. He could only have that perspective because of his values as a modern Japanese person from Earth. He wasn't going to start going on about all humans being brothers, but the idea that nobles and peasants were different species was ridiculous to him.

Sam and the others still looked stunned. Vandal started to worry that his radical views had significantly unsettled them.

I see. Very impressive, young master, Sam finally said, looking impressed. *The rank of a noble is nothing but a steppingstone to your greater ambitions!*

"... Huh?"

The ambitions of one foretold in the prophecies of a goddess are going to be bigger than average! Sam crowed.

"Hey!" Vandal exclaimed.

I heard you even proclaimed to Borkz that you are the Oracle Child! So, you do

plan to use Talosheim as the base to unify the continent!

“Now I know you’re teasing me,” Vandal replied. It sounded like all sorts of talk was getting around about him. Vandal had no such plans for anything quite so expansive, and he scratched at his head. At the most, his plans ran to restoring Talosheim.

Don’t worry, Vandal. You’ve always done well with encouragement, Dalshia assured him. *I bet you can unify the continent, even if it takes you a thousand years.*

“That time frame sounds a little too long,” Vandal replied. He wasn’t so hung up on unification that he was going to spend 1,000 years on it. It surely wouldn’t be easy either.

Life didn’t give you what you wanted just because you wanted it. But an honorary noble seemed like a good long-term target.



The next day, Borkz still hadn’t returned, so Vandal couldn’t ask him about jobs. Instead, he opted to join Zadilis and her pupils.

“We have the boy tagging along with us today, so we’ll be doing some special training,” Zadilis announced.

They were outside the walls of Talosheim. The gathering including Zadilis and the other ghoul Magicians, the black goblins, and the anubis, including Memedigga.

“The goal of today’s session will be to obtain the Skip Incantation skill.”

This was greeted with cries of enthusiasm. It went without saying that Skip Incantation was a very effective skill, allowing magic to be fired off in quick succession—to the limits of MP and Intellect—without any preparation time or arm-waving.

Furthermore, the incantation itself sometimes gave enemies an idea of what magic was coming. Skip Incantation left them in the dark, unable to react with defensive magic. It was far harder to earn than the skill Reduce Incantation, but the effect was also far more potent. The way to learn it was also extremely simple: just keep on casting magic without incanting.

It did require multiple times the MP as it did with the incantation, and the strength of the magic itself was reduced by more than a tenth. Even a veteran Magician would have trouble doing it multiple times.

Zadilis and the others were still making the attempt, however, and started to wordlessly use their magic.

Zadilis's fingers glowed, like fireflies blending into the sunlight. The other ghouls and giantling undead were making water droplets near their fingers, making small flickers of fire blink on and off, or blowing a faint breeze. After doing this a few times, some of them already started to run out of MP.

"Boy, you're up," Zadilis said.

"Okay," Vandal replied. He had just been watching, up until that point, but now he used Spirit Bodification to turn his arm into what looked like a bundle of cables. Then he extended them out to touch Zadilis and the others. Then he used Magical Power Transfer to gift them some of his own pool of MP.

This was the key point of this training. Zadilis and the others lacked the MP to train and acquire Skip Incantation in any reasonable amount of time. For

Vandal, training to increase his MP by expending it was like trying to pour water from a constantly refilling bucket.

The solution to both of these issues was to have Vandal supply the others with his own MP. That would allow Vandal to burn off his vast reserve quickly and easily.

“Good. Continue the training!” Zadilis said.

They had created an environment in which they could do tens days’ worth of training for Skip Incantation in a single day. The only issue was . . .

“This is pretty boring.” Vandal wasn’t really feeling anything from simply working as a magical battery and was almost at his wits’ end.

He considered sitting cross-legged and closing his eyes in meditation. At least then he would more look the part.



Name: Basdia

Rank: 5

Race: Ghoul Amazon

Level: 0

Job: Warrior

Job Level: 24

Job History: Apprentice Warrior

Age: 27

——Passive Skills

[Night Vision] [Brute Strength: Level 4 (UP!)] [Resist Pain: Level 2]

[Paralytic Venom (Claws): Level 3] [Resist Magic: Level 1 (NEW!)]

——Active Skills

[Axe Proficiency: Level 4 (UP!)] [Shield Proficiency: Level 3 (UP!)] [Bow Proficiency: Level 3 (UP!)]

[Thrown Projectile Proficiency: Level 2 (UP!)] [Sneaking Steps: Level 2 (UP!)] [Cooperation: Level 3 (UP!)]

[Instinct: Level 1 (NEW!)]

——Maladies

Infertile: Cured



The domain of Viscount Valchez was thriving.

That was thanks to their reclamation of the jungle demon barren located three days from town. All of the most powerful monsters had already been wiped out. The remnants were a few orcs, armed with nothing but tree branches, and the adventurers who had been hired to deal with them had no trouble doing so.

The Soldiers chopped down the trees, and the Magicians were using earth magic to level the terrain and break up inconvenient boulders. Only six months had passed since the work began, and yet they had already reduced the jungle to a quarter of its original size.

The work continued until the snows came. Valchez's people worked the jungle into fertile farmland, with wells, ponds, and waterways. Everything was ready for a few villages to be built. When spring arrived, people who wanted to live on the new land gathered, erecting houses and sowing the fields with crops. As the land was a former demon barren, it could be expected to provide a reasonable harvest from the first year, so the pioneers living there didn't require much aid.

Once the period of exception from taxes ended, Viscount Valchez expected the region to do well. He would recoup the cost of the entire operation in ten years, if not sooner. He also arranged for his own third son to take up the position of magistrate in the new territory.

Of course, the Viscount and his ministers weren't the only ones to benefit. Those who would be moving to the new farming villages included poor people who couldn't find work, second sons unable to succeed their own fathers, and adventurers who had been forced to retire due to injury or age but still needed to make money. The new development would allow them to have their own homes and fields, to get married, and have families.

Farming villages also needed security to protect them, increasing the military budget and postings for soldiers. Valchez and the church made plans to build temples to the God of Law and Life Alda, creating new posts among the clergy. His domain would now have a fresh and cheap supply of produce that, until now, he had to rely on other domains to acquire. Furthermore, the closest town to the new villages would need to supply them with all sorts of daily necessities, creating further streams of income. Even people outside Viscount Valchez's domain felt the effects, gathering their own poor folk to ship them off to a better life. The blessings of this new endeavor rained down on everyone.

Well, almost everyone. The adventurers and Marshal Palpapekk were the exceptions. But even then, it was more that they had gained little, rather than actually lost anything. The adventurers had lost the jungle demon barren, which had been one source of potential income. However, there were other large demon barrens closer to the existing settlements in Viscount Valchez's domain. There had been no dungeons in this one either. It boiled down to nothing more than the loss of a relatively small demon barren three days walk from the town.

In the case of Marshal Thomas Palpapekk, he had anticipated the State Bursar coming after him with suspicions around the legitimacy of the development project and back-room deals. In order to sidestep such issues, he had chosen to abdicate from his position as marshal. The Milg government wasn't pleased with the problems that happened under his watch, so they couldn't just give him a pass. But it was also clear that the result was a positive for the nation. His failures had taken place during an unprecedented situation, and no one had died as a result of them. It was therefore believed that he would be back in the post once the development work concluded, or at least within the next ten years.

The post of marshal did not belong exclusively to the Palpapekk household anyway. It passed among the three families that held the title of count across a period of every few years, or at most a decade. If it was monopolized by a single family, assassination would leave the military without an effective leader. With other families that had experience as marshals, the kingdom at least had retainers and others with the know-how to support an interim marshal. It might have sounded brutal, but Milg was in a constant state of war with its neighboring nation. There was no room for naivety.

Among the three houses, however, the Palpapekk line had produced many excellent marshals. Thomas, in particular, was known as the guardian of the

nation, respected and powerful. Numerous ministers of the Palpapekk house were already earmarked to join the security forces for the new villages. Even Thomas was seeing some rewards.

All in all, the development wasn't harming anyone, and everyone accepted it pretty happily.

Everyone in the daylight, anyway.

"You haven't even found a route across the mountains yet?"

The red-haired noble species vampire, Eleonora, was sitting in a room in one of the better inns in town, looking down with barely concealed—indeed, completely open—contempt at Sercrent.

His face and body had at least recovered from the terrible wounds inflicted by the punishments of Vilkain. But that torture was nothing compared to the contempt she was showing him.

"Do you realize how difficult a thing you are asking?" Sercrent snapped back, feeling the straining limits of his patience but keeping himself from shouting any louder. This was an expensive inn, but it was not a castle or manor under vampire control. They couldn't afford to let anyone in the next room or corridors hear their discussion.

"Is it? The humans managed it 200 years ago," Eleonora replied.

"And things have changed in the time since then!" Sercrent countered. "Why do we need to avoid monsters, anyway? That's a big difference from humans for us!"

Both Sercrent and Eleonora were noble species vampires. Their combat strength was higher than lower-ranking dragons, perhaps equal to a fire or ice dragon. They also had all sorts of special abilities and all the advantages that

came from resembling humans.

Of course, they had weaknesses. Sunlight, silver, light attribute magic, and anti-vampire magic weapons created by Divine Alda and her faithful. But the only thing they had to worry about when crossing the mountains was sunlight. There were some monsters that used light magic but generally only for distractions like Sunblind, generating illusions, or sucking the light out of the air to make darkness for a sneak attack. Nothing that vampires had to worry about. Even if they bumped into every monster along the way, sure, they might lose a few subordinate species, but that was the worst that would happen.

Eleonora gave an exasperated sigh.

“Sercrent . . . you really are a hopeless fool.”

“How dare you!”

“You also have a talent for getting mad while keeping your voice down,” she admitted. “But you need to use your head a little more.” The air of elegance she wore around Vilkain and the others was gone, and she handled Sercrent directly and roughly. “Did you forget the very information that you reported? The target dhampir is a Medium. That means he could potentially extract information from the spirits of any monsters that we kill.”

“Sure, I mean . . . that might be possible, but certainly not easy,” Sercrent said defensively. “Your own report into the target suggested they couldn’t do much.”

There weren’t many who bothered with the job Medium. It was worthless in battle and couldn’t produce items. About all it was good for was talking to the dead, telling fortunes, and maybe driving some spirits off. So there weren’t many Mediums, and they had even less renown. Eleonora had been

investigating the job, visiting the adventurers' guild, and using her own special skill to talk to actual Mediums and collect information, while Sercrent found them a path across the mountains.

"And you think the spirits of monsters will go talk to a dhampir?" Sercrent continued. Mediums could do things like see and talk to spirits, summon the spirits of the dead, and read residual energy. "Dead men tell no tales" didn't exactly apply to them, which was impressive, but not every spirit cared to talk to a Medium, and they couldn't tame undead either.

Sercrent didn't believe a medium could pose much of a threat, but Eleonora saw the situation differently.

"What if this one is different?" she said. "I've been learning about normal Mediums. This dhampir has been an exception to almost every rule so far. Don't you think that means he might not be a normal Medium?"

The suggestion shut Sercrent up. Maybe the dhampir could summon a selection of spirits that met certain conditions across a wider area. If he used that to summon spirits of monsters that had been killed by those who wanted to harm him, the Boundary Mountains turned into more than just a wall. It would be a wall crawling with loyal sentries.

Even Eleonora didn't think anything like that was actually possible, but this dhampir had done the impossible multiple times already. The vampire scowling in front of her was in all this hot water precisely because of those impossible feats.

"That's why we need you to make a proper route," Eleonora sniped. "You don't understand anything! Could you at least be gracious enough to understand to do what you are told, even if you don't understand why?"

Sercrent ground his teeth, angry at how deep this insult cut. But this kind of exchange was meat and potatoes for the vampires who served the Demon God of Living Pleasure. In their hierarchy, there was only above and below. They talked about being equal, comrades, allies, brothers, but in reality, they only considered whether the other person was above or below them.

It was simple when the difference in race was the deciding factor, such as between the progenitor and noble species or noble and subordinate species. It was a lot more complex when it came to divisions within the progenitor or noble species. Even if the other vampire was above them, they would always be looking for chances to drag the other down. If the other vampire was below them, meanwhile, they continually reminded the other of their own superiority, making sure they didn't get any funny ideas while crawling at their feet. If the relationship wasn't yet settled, then they competed in various ways to determine who was superior.

Eleonora might be a genius, but she hadn't been a vampire for long. She held more power than Sercrent, but he had lived for considerably longer, so the difference in their position hadn't been much. However, Sercrent's failure had led to his punishment by Vilkain and his degradation in front of almost every important figure in the community. He hadn't received support or a good word from his "parent," Gubamon, and had received orders that would clearly lead to his immediate execution if he failed to complete them. That put him firmly at the bottom of the pile.

So, Eleonora had to make sure Sercrent knew his place. Otherwise, it would mean she was below this failure of a man—the lowest of the low.

"Okay. I'll get the subordinate species working hard," Sercrent said.

"If it looks like they're going to take too long, ask Lord Gubamon for help,"

Eleonora told him. “He was involved in all that business 200 years ago, correct? He might know something useful.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Sercrent said grudgingly. Then he left the room.

Eleonora watched him go. “Sorry about all this,” she muttered after he was gone. “But I’m not letting you drag me down.”

She knew neither hunger nor filth, and she had the strength to fight a dragon. But there was still a flicker of terror in Eleonora’s eyes.

The terror of understanding. If she screwed up, next time she would be the one standing where Sercrent was now.



It was the seventh day and final day of training for the Skip Incantation skill.

“Aha! I have finally obtained the Skip Incantation skill! This is all thanks to you, Child!” Nuaza shouted and thrust one of his arms into the air. It was surprisingly thick, considering it should have just been bone and skin.

“Hmmm. I have been bested,” Zadilis said, sounding less than pleased.

“Hahaha, I might be ‘lesser,’ but I am still a lich!”

“And I’m a Ghoul Mage. My Job is Magician, too,” Zadilis said, clearly upset. She had yet to fully grasp how to make the skill work.

Monsters did get skill modifiers depending on race. They weren’t as striking as those a human got for taking Jobs, however. The boosts were as simple as orcs being strong, or kobolts agile. In this case, it meant that Nuaza had a superior aptitude for Skip Incantation than Zadilis.

In this world, the talents of an individual indeed made it easier for them to level up, rank up, or acquire skills faster than average. However, that was no replacement for hard work. Whether human or monster, repeated training and testing raised one's level, allowing one to meet the right conditions to rank up and acquire new skills. It was just a matter of when.

Someone with natural talent for the sword could push Sword Proficiency to level 5 in a year without even trying. A regular person might have to strain themselves for years, even decades to reach the same level. A dumb, weak goblin could become a Goblin King—it would just take enough work to practically kill them. An adventurer with superhuman talents could train hard, gain experience, defeat a dragon, clear a difficult dungeon, and obtain the title of rank A adventurer. An adventurer of lesser skill could train and earn experience for the same amount of time and not climb higher than D. But if they pushed themselves harder than the superman, trained ten, a hundred times harder, all that hard work and persistence could just maybe allow them to become rank A too.

Most would give up before obtaining such rewards. There were few willing to sacrifice their entire lives to becoming the best. Adventurers and monsters, in particular, would generally die or get injured so badly that they had to retire prior to seeing any payout from such hard work. It was survival of the fittest on both sides of the coin.

I liked that kind of main character when I was on Earth, though, Vandal thought. The type who defeats a genius by working hard. He was gradually crushing up some acorns while supplying everyone with MP, idling in his thoughts. Everyone around him probably considered him to be that kind of genius. His massive volume of MP qualified him for that. But on Earth he had just been a regular kid, and on Origin he had done little more than suffer, so he

hadn't considered himself special there either.

"Now you should be able to level up Skip Incantation just by using it, so you can return to normal training," Vandal said.

"Hmmm, the fun is over, is it," Nuaza said.

"Hehehe, off you trot. Go find some dungeon or demon barren," Zadilis cackled, giving the crestfallen Nuaza a taunting smile. Receiving Vandal's MP was apparently quite a pleasant experience for those under the effects of his Death Attribute Allure.

"Sorry, but that's my week of holiday over," Vandal piped up. "I'm going to be heading into a dungeon myself tomorrow."

"What!?" Zadilis exclaimed.

Now it was Nuaza's turn to give a mean chuckle.

"B-Boy, I think you should take a bit more time off," Zadilis said.

"I don't need time off, I need experience. There are materials I need as well," Vandal said.

The next target on his list was Doran Aquatic Cavern. It was rank D, just like Garan Valley, but deeper, with more dangerous monsters and more frequent traps. It was also the dungeon that provided Talosheim with seafood.

Doran Aquatic Cavern's floors were lakes dotted with small islands, or caves with underground rivers flowing through them. The water in all of these locations was seawater, so these lakes and rivers were full of seafood. Vandal hadn't been a massive fan of seafood on Earth, but there was something he desperately wanted now.

Seaweed. Actual seaweed, or something he could use as a substitute.

I've made walnut and acorn miso, but I can't get the miso soup to turn out right. That's because I need something else—fish stock! Vandal had made his own miso soup when he was a student on Earth, and he had never needed stock then. When he tried to make miso soup here on Ramda, however, following the same steps, it hadn't come out anything like it.

He had been wondering if it was the ingredients, or something in the walnuts or acorns that didn't suit the dish, and then it hit him in a flash. The miso he had used on Earth already contained fish stock! But here on Ramda, Vandal had been using his own homemade miso. There was no way that was going to turn into the kind of miso soup he craved.

Making tasty miso required tasty stock. That was the conclusion he had reached. For stock, the choices were dried bonito, dried sardines, and kelp. He needed to obtain these ingredients from the Doran Aquatic Cavern—in particular, kelp. The Vangaia Continent might not have had a culture of eating seaweed. They didn't on the Amidd Empire side—he knew that much. Dalshia and Sam had said they never heard of anyone eating seaweed. Even on Earth, only a few regions and peoples ate seaweed, and he expected even fewer on Ramda. If there was little chance of obtaining any even after reaching the Olbaum Electorate Kingdom, he wanted to get his hands on some as quickly as possible.

Drying bonito would take preparation time, so he preferred the kelp. All sorts of seaweed, really. Especially if he wanted to make other Japanese dishes like sushi, ramen, soba, somen, and rice balls. Some agar weed would be nice, too, to make gelatin.

“Zadilis, I need kelp. My miso soup needs it,” Vandal proclaimed.

“I think it is delicious enough already,” she replied.

“As do I, but the Child always seeks to improve himself,” Nuaza said.

“In this case, I should think his motivation is more related to his love of food,” Zadilis snipped.

But once they tasted his proper miso soup, Vandal was confident that their skepticism would change. They had been like this about the miso before he made that.

Now back to thinking about ingredients.



The next day, Vandal entered Doran Aquatic Cavern. This time, his party was comprised of Sam, Braga, Zulan, Kachia, and Vigaro. Sam came for his carrying capacity and to try out his new equipment; the black goblin Braga wanted to test out his new strength after his recent rank-up; Zulan, a rare former Scout among the giantling undead, came along to keep an eye on Braga; Kachia was their frontliner; and Vigaro, clearly overkill for a rank D dungeon, was along for insurance.

When they entered the first floor . . .

“Fish! Catch those fish!”

“Fish sauce! We need fish sauce!”

A bunch of giantling undead were using nets to catch small fish.

“This looks familiar,” Vandal said.

“It can’t be helped, Child. All for the fish sauce,” Zulan said.

“I’m the one who has to make it,” Vandal reminded him.

The Talosheim fishermen had originally ignored all the small fish. Anything below 20 inches was so small compared to the giantlings, they couldn't get much nourishment from it and couldn't sell it for much either. Only the big fish were worth their while. But the fish sauce made by Vandal turned this big fish thinking around. It was as popular as the miso, converting giantling undead into fans left and right. Some that had been farmers in life had even changed to being fishermen now.

The water in Doran Aquatic Cavern was seawater, and so sea salt could be made from it. However, salt came entirely from the rock salt in Garan Valley. Unlike the rocks, which could be hacked out and carried home, making sea salt was a pain in the ass. Letting the water dry off didn't remove the impurities, and there was no making salt fields in the middle of a dungeon. No sunlight got down here anyway.

Even if the seawater itself was going to be carried out, that wouldn't be any easier. In order to make any reasonable amount of salt, the giantlings would need something like a barrel. They would need to carry those around, exposing the carrier to potential monster attacks. If the barrels broke in those attacks, then everything would be for naught. That was why Talosheim rarely bothered with sea salt, although the second princess, Zandia, had apparently sometimes used her space attribute magic to carry water out and make salt.

"I want to collect some seawater before we carry on," Vandal said.

"Huh?" Zulan and the others were all surprised, figuring that Vandal should be happy with the rock salt.

He ignored them, hopping up onto Sam's wagon bed and rolling out a barrel he had brought along.

"Rise, get in," Vandal said. The clear seawater running alongside the path

turned into an aqua golem and climbed into the barrel. Liquid golems had difficulty maintaining their shape but could manage to move into a barrel placed next to the bank. Then Vandal just needed to move the barrel back to the wagon. “Rise.” The wall alongside the road rumbled to life, becoming a rock golem with the barrel already in its grasp.

“Off you go to Talosheim,” Vandal told it, and the golem promptly started off. Golem Creation was such a convenient skill.

“Vandal, why want salt water?” Vigaro asked.

“Rock salt and sea salt taste different,” he replied.

“They do?”

“Once you’ve tasted them both, you’ll understand,” Vandal said. He also had decided to make salt from this dungeon because he didn’t want to have to rely on a single source for something as important as salt. Having multiple routes was safest. After all, there were giantling undead who were hooked on miso and fish sauce. A stable supply of salt was vital.

Still, Vandal was really starting to want soy or some sweet condiment to use as an ingredient.

“Maybe there’s some sugarcane somewhere,” he muttered. But this probably wasn’t the dungeon for that.

Vandal had been having trouble leveling up. Before entering Doran Aquatic Cavern, he approached the former rank A adventurer, Sword King Borkz, with this issue; the zombie tapped his finger on his forehead.

“That can’t be helped,” Borkz said. “You’re a Specialist Job, Death Mage, and you went to Garan Valley taking those guys with you. You can’t expect to level

up much like that.”

This was information that anyone who had worked through a job for a tier or two had been on the receiving end of.

“You know how the experience you need for each level differs between jobs? Apprentice jobs go up the easiest, standard jobs an average amount, and specialist jobs take the longest.”

Apprentice jobs raised levels really easily. Basdia and Zadilis had reached level 100 in just a few days. Standard jobs were those with a wide range of skill modifiers, such as Warrior and Magician. Specialist jobs were things like Swordsman, specialized for the Sword Proficiency skill, or those specialized for specific attribute magic, like Fire Magician or Water Magician.

“Your job is newly discovered, so I don’t know much about it either,” Borkz continued. “The name tells us it must be specialized for death attribute magic, but it also seems to provide modifiers to more skills than something like Light Magician or Fire Magician would.”

Those were the kind of jobs that required a lot of experience to level up.

“Only adventurers or folk seeking to master a single profession will select a specialist job. You can’t expect to race up through the levels in a profession like that.”

As a side note, there was also a reason why both the ghouls had ranks like monsters and a dhampir like Vandal didn’t. Vida’s new races like vampires and lamia, of mixed descent from the goddess and monsters, had ranks like monsters but could take jobs like humans. Because Vandal was a dhampir, born to a vampire and dark elf, he was only a quarter monster. That brought his human side more to the fore, so he didn’t have a rank. Borkz and the other

giantling undead had also not had ranks prior to becoming monsters, as they were born from the goddess and the brethren of Zeno, also a god.

Vandal tried to not worry too much about the slower speed he was leveling up as they proceeded through Doran Aquatic Cavern.

The monsters were mainly water races. For the first five floors, there were sahuagin with fish bodies sprouting white legs, the flying sharks from the waterways of Talosheim, big cancer, crabs with claws large enough to grab a man and fling him around, and massive killer octopi. The sahuagin were only rank 2, demi-human monster known as “sea goblins.” They mainly used spears, and they pretty much sucked.

“You can’t eat these, right?” Vandal asked.

“If you hadn’t eaten a thing in three days and were on the verge of literal starvation, then they might taste close to palatable,” Zulan said.

Vandal’s party had already fought the flying sharks multiple times, meaning no one had much trouble with them.

“Quick Slash!” Braga avoided the snapping bite of a shark, unleashing a Dagger Proficiency battle tech to bite deep into the neck of the flying monster. Braga had been born nimble and light, and his training had only accentuated those talents. Zulan had trained him in the ways of a Scout, so he had acquired Dagger Proficiency skills that made use of speed rather than strength. His speed was already on par with that of wild animals.

Born as the weakest of the new breeds, a rank 2 black goblin, even in Garan Valley, Braga was fighting enemies at least the same rank as himself, if not higher. That had earned him a big chunk of experience. As a result, he had

already ranked up, even though he had only been born six months ago. He was now a Black Goblin Scout.

“I turned him into this, and he scares me sometimes,” Zulan admitted.

“He did almost completely chop the head off that shark,” Vandal commented.

“No, that’s not it,” Zulan continued, adroitly combining frowning brows with grinning lips. “A monster but a Scout. Superior physical abilities to a human but the same range of skills. There are plenty of monster races with pretty scary special abilities, able to conceal themselves completely and then catch their enemies unawares, but that’s just instinct. In Braga’s case, he could trail adventurers unnoticed and assassinate their healer. Or he could sneak into a town and kidnap a key target.”

“I see,” Vandal said. “It sounds like Braga and his fellows would make good covert agents in the future.”

That was a scary thought. The Noble Orc who had given Vandal such trouble had been loaded out with dangerous combat skills. Vandal had needed to take major damage in order to defeat him. If he had been nothing but a muscle-brained braggard, then Vandal wouldn’t have needed to cut a finger to win. And Braga had the potential to become the same kind of threat. But the way he didn’t have to fight head-on was particularly potent.

It wasn’t just Braga. All the black goblins were a frightening bunch. Braga was just leading the pack. With Zulan’s help, Vandal expected the rest to rank up to Black Goblin Scouts within the year. That meant all of the black goblins had talents in assassination and covert operations. They could become a troop of monsters capable of sneaking past human defenses and infiltrating villages and towns. Their appearances meant they couldn’t exactly go undercover, but they could kill sentries and open the gates for allies waiting outside.

“But you knew what you were doing when you started teaching them,” Vandal pointed out. “You’re the one who taught him all those Dagger Proficiency moves.”

In response, Zulan just laughed.

“You’re a monster yourself! An undead!” Vandal continued. Zulan wouldn’t stop laughing. “I think you just wanted to brag about your student a little,” Vandal concluded.

“Hahaha, you are a smart one, Child,” Zulan said.

“I understand how proud you feel.” Vandal felt it too, thinking about how that tiny Braga had turned into this. Of course, it wasn’t quite like being his father. But nothing would make Vandal happier than Braga becoming strong enough to defeat monsters alone and providing additional strength if the Milg Shield Kingdom sent in their forces again.

Braga sliced off the fins, loaded them into a crate in Sam’s wagon, and came back over.

“What are you talking about, King?”

“We were saying how you’re like a ninja,” Vandal told him, a bit embarrassed to say it in such a straightforward way.

Both Braga and Zulan tilted their heads in response.

“Ninja?” Zulan asked.

“What? You’ve never heard that word? Braga, maybe I can understand, but you too, Zulan?”

Zakkato had tried to spread knowledge and technology from his own world, so Vandal had expected at least Zulan to have heard this term. The next break

they took, Vandal told them all about ninjas.

The big cancer crabs and killer octopi were only rank 3, so there was nothing to write home about there.

In addition to seafood, there were also spots in the Doran Aquatic Cavern where metals could be found. The veins of the dungeon didn't run with gold, silver, or mithril, but tin, copper, and iron could be found. The miners hacked at the walls with their pickaxes in between hacking at the monsters trying to hack back at them.

Vandal had thought that dragging the heavy ore out of the dungeon might be a problem, but it turned out that dungeon ore appeared as lumps of metal, already pure enough to be turned into metal accessories and gear. Vandal was forced to admit that some things were just more convenient in a fantasy world.

This explained why Talosheim had a forge but no refinery. Vandal and his party greeting the miners loaded down with metals took a break to rest and eat and then continued on their way.

From floor 6, rank 4 monsters started to show up. These included the chameleon squid, which changed its body to hide and then surprise its foes, and the blade shrimp, which looked like a five-foot giant lobster with sharp blades instead of antenna. There was also the shark-eating anemone, which looked like a big flower but had countless paralytic tentacles. Those three proved fairly tricky.

Braga's Instinct and Detect skills and Vandal's Detect Danger: Death allowed them to quickly discover any hiding monsters. While it didn't feel as much like overkill compared to in Garan Valley, they were pretty overpowered for all this.

“Raaagh! Quick Slash!” Zulan sliced through the air at an incredible speed, slashing a blade shrimp in two. His handling of the dagger was like a berserker.

“Graaaaaah! Whip Axe!” The wriggling, dancing feelers were chopped down by Vigaro’s axe, held in his even more flexible arm. He shredded the body of the shark-eating anemone in seconds. Vigaro seemed even more aggressive since he ranked up to a Ghoul Berserker. Which, on second thought, made sense.

Young master, should you perhaps stop them? Sam asked. *They only came along in a supervisory position, correct?*

Zulan was one thing, but Vigaro was an especially high rank, and defeating monsters in a rank D dungeon wasn’t going to give either of them much experience, with the exception of perhaps the boss. Fighting enemies so far below them wouldn’t even hone their skills much, apart from keeping them loose. In fact, the monsters were so weak that spending too long fighting them could even be detrimental.

But there was a simple reason why they were out there fighting on the frontlines.

“They just got bored,” Vandal said with shrug.

Letting all that rage build up might not be the best idea, Sam admitted.

“And we can take a break while they fight.”

“I don’t mind that,” Kachia said, “but can you really eat all this?” She looked distinctly concerned about the spread of killer octopi legs and sashimi made from blade shrimp and other fish and seafood they had captured.

“Of course,” Vandal said. “Do you not eat octopus or shrimp in the Milg Shield Kingdom?” There were nations on Earth that didn’t. He had also heard of ancient cultures that didn’t eat seafood for religious reasons, and tribes that

looked down on the practice, but he didn't know the details. Maybe it was the same in Ramda.

"We don't have access to the ocean," Kachia replied. "Shrimp are one thing, but I've only ever seen dried octopus."

Vandal had been wrong. If there was dried octopus around, then people definitely ate it. That made Vandal wonder where her hesitation was coming from. Maybe it just wasn't to her taste.

"What about the fish? Eat some of that," Vandal suggested.

"That's not the problem!" Kachia replied. "This is all raw!"

"Oh, right," Vandal said. "That's the issue."

There were dishes all over the world that used raw fish and meat on Earth, not just in Japan, so he hadn't considered that would be a problem. Maybe Ramda didn't have carpaccio. Or maybe Bellwood had spread disinformation about raw fish being dangerous in order to cut off Zakkato's attempts to spread sushi and sashimi.

"It's fine. Look." Vandal pointed over at Braga, whose reaction was completely different from Kachia's—he was stuffing his face.

"So good! So good!" the black goblin repeated. He was dipping the shrimp, the octopus, and the shellfish in the wasabi and fish sauce Vandal had brought along and scoffing them down one after the other.

Soy sauce would have been preferable, but the stuff made from the walnut and acorn miso wasn't that great, so Vandal had only brought the fish sauce. He still wasn't sure if the walnuts or acorns were the problem, or if it was the bacteria he was using in the fermentation. In any case, he wanted soybeans as quickly as possible.

“This is great!” Braga said. “Kachia, eat!”

I have to admit, the combination of this delicious flesh and sharp wasabi is really something else, Sam said, providing a running report of his culinary findings.

Kachia still shook her head. “People don’t eat raw fish!” she protested.

“You’re a ghoul, Kachia,” Vandal reminded her.

“I know! But ghouls don’t eat raw stuff either!” she exclaimed.

Monsters like goblins and kobolts didn’t tend to cook stuff. They would just devour meat and fish raw and wriggling. Other demi-human monsters might cook their meat, but that was about it. But the ghouls had been cooking skewers of meat or wrapping it in leaves to steam since long before Vandal showed up. Primitive, perhaps, but it definitely counted as cooking. Vandal suspected this was an element of the ghouls being one of Vida’s new races, like the giantlings.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Vandal assured her. “Not only is this stuff incredibly fresh, but I’ve used Death to Bacteria, Death to Bugs, and Detox to remove anything harmful.”

Even if the source of the meat had been infested with bacteria and parasites, those were all gone now. Detox would have eradicated any poison as well. Death attribute magic did a great job of keeping one alive, Vandal reflected. With that bevvvy of magic, you could eat a poisonous mushroom and walk away unscathed.

“Well, if you insist . . .” Kachia’s eyes widened in surprise when she tried it. “Hmm? It’s good!” Then she started to scoff sashimi down exactly like Braga. Vandal was happy as well, seeing his efforts so rewarded.

They were finally rejoined by the other two members of the party once they had finished decimating the nearby monster population.

“I’ve started to love raw flesh since becoming undead,” Zulan commented, starting to eat.

“Raw? You hurt tummy!” Vigaro exclaimed, but after hearing the same explanation as Kachia, he felt reassured enough to dig in.

They continued downward. The mid-boss on floor 10 was a pair of bosses: a rank 4 Sahuagin Berserker and a rank 3 Sahuagin Pirate. They were worthless from a materials perspective, so became punching bags for Vandal’s Brawling Proficiency.

From floor 11 onward, the Doran Aquatic Cavern started to feature rank 4 monsters commanding rank 3 ones. The frequency of traps also increased. There were pit traps lined with poisonous spikes, spears concealed among the stalactites hanging from the ceiling, and spring-loaded axes that flew out from the walls.

“King! There’s a trap here!” Braga reported.

“Correct,” Vandal replied. “Can you disarm it?”

“I’ll try! Ah!”

A plume of poison gas spread out around them, which Vandal removed via Detox.

“Sorry,” Braga said. “I couldn’t.”

“I saw. Don’t worry, just try again next time,” Vandal told him.

“The Child is a backrow party member. Why is he the one spotting all the

traps?” Zulan asked.

Traps could be more dangerous than monsters. But Vandal always had his Detect Danger: Death magic running, which told him where any of the traps were that would lead to death if triggered. That was why he could spot them faster than Braga, who was in the lead and actively searching for them. Furthermore, many of the traps were based around poison, meaning Vandal’s Detox was suited to handling them.

“Do we even need a Scout with you around, Child?”

“Don’t get too upset,” Vandal chided him. “We’re here for materials and training, right?”

Vandal wasn’t reporting or disarming the traps, even after he spotted them. He let Braga have a go first. “I also can’t spot traps that aren’t related to killing people. Like a trap that spat out sticky oil or something.”

That sounds more like a prank than a trap, Sam said.

Vandal was pretty sure he wouldn’t be able to detect a glitter bomb either.

Even if you can’t spot that, who cares? It isn’t going to kill you.

“That’s true,” Vandal admitted. Around half the traps in a dungeon were direct attempts on the life of the one triggering them, but the others made it easier for the monsters to kill them, like restricting movement or causing maladies, so Vandal could detect them all. “But I won’t always be around.”

That’s a fair point, Sam said.

They continued downward, spending another night sleeping rough. On the next day, they finally reached the bottom floor. Two hundred years ago, there had only been 14 floors here, but just like Garan Valley, the place had expanded to 18 when left to its own devices. Along the way, Vandal had obtained his

desired seaweed from a massive subterranean lake on floor 15, and some bonito too, so he was thrilled. Once he returned to Talosheim, he was going to make a smoking room and dry some bonito. If that proved too difficult, he would just use the old-fashioned technique of drying without smoking.

At that point, they entered the boss chamber. There had been water everywhere up until now, but this final room was covered with what looked like a fine white sand.

“No water this time?” Zulan said in surprise, stepping on the sand repeatedly to test the waters—figuratively, of course.

“There used to be water here?” Vandal asked.

“The inside of dungeons can change?” Kachia asked, at almost the same time.

“The interior of a dungeon can indeed change, a little at a time,” Zulan said, looking pleased with himself for being able to answer. “The water levels on rivers and lakes might go up or down, for example. The boss chamber especially can change a lot depending on the boss.”

“Does this room tell you what the boss will be?” Braga asked.

Zulan thought for a moment before replying. “There’s no water, so either a higher class of flying shark, or a higher class of bullet turtle,” he finally said. “Both of them can fly.”

“Sounds like we dine on soup. Shark fin or turtle,” Vigaro said happily, swinging his axe around.

Then the meal he was already looking forward to made a crash at the back of the chamber as some monsters appeared.

“Looks like the turtle option,” Braga said. “The small one is a bullet turtle. The big one is the higher class.”

He was looking up at a turtle so big it made Kachia take a deep breath and Vigaros and Vandal's blood boil. It was large enough to be mistaken for a dragon! Its rough shell looked to be well over sixty feet tall, with a huge head and four pillar-like limbs sticking out and a tail at the back. The numerous other turtles just the icing on the cake.

Zulan gave a shout, his voice tense. "Watch out!" he warned. "This is an island turtle! The hidden boss! Don't drop your guard!"

The ranks of monsters that appeared in any given dungeon were mostly fixed. Based on that information, the adventurers' guild assigned it a rank from A to E. However, in rare cases, a monster higher than the average rank could appear as the boss of a dungeon.

Some thought this was a further trap by the Demon King to punish the arrogant. Others thought it was a further trial by the gods to keep humans vigilant at all times. Some thought it was just coincidence. The truth was unknown, but adventurers called such enhanced bosses "hidden bosses." And it was a phenomenon that all adventurers wished to avoid.

"Do these turtles breathe fire?" Vandal asked, engaging the island turtle.

"No way!" came the reply from multiple directions as the others took on the bullet turtles. So at least *these* reptiles didn't breathe fire.

From the ground, the bullet turtles looked like a sideshow compared to the glory of the island turtle, but they were pretty nasty monsters in their own right. They drew their heads and legs into their shells and then used wind magic to lift into the air, propelling themselves forward while spinning at high speeds. Vandal could fly with his own non-attribute Flight magic, but the others were

not so flexible, leaving Vandal to deal with the island turtle on his own at first.

“Gah! They are fast and tough! And they work well together!” Braga complained.

“Their shells are tougher than steel!” Zulan warned. “Make your attacks count or you’ll only be damaging your own weapons!”

“Don’t panic, just handle your own turtles,” Vandal said. “While you do that —” The mouth of the island turtle snapped down at him, but Vandal dodged and continued—“I’ll be practicing fighting an orihalcon dragon golem.” The island turtle was bigger than anything Vandal had fought so far. In terms of size, it was on par with the dragon golem that Vida had left behind. It was also rank 6, so weaker than the Noble Orc Bugogan, who Vandal had fought in the jungle demon barren.

Vandal had fought enough monsters by now to know that they had strengths beyond rank. One such strength became apparent when the island turtle swiftly pulled its head inside its shell.

It was a superspeed, high impact headbutt. The turtle employed the full strength of the muscles in its mighty neck to try and smash Vandal with its thickly scaled forehead. Vandal fired off some MP Shot spells to intercept the incoming attack, but the island turtle protected its head with the same wind magic that its minions used, smoothly diverting the MP Shots away.

“Magic Sucking Barrier, Anti-Attack Barrier!”

Vandal decided to use his own barriers that absorbed magical power and energy to try and stop the speeding headbutt.

Magic Sucking Barrier might not be too effective, but Anti-Attack Barrier tends to hold up, he thought. The anti-attack spell in question had defended against

the raging attacks of Bugogan's magical sword, but the headbutt from the island turtle provided even more pressure than that. The thrust from the turtle simply had more compressed kinetic energy. *I guess it isn't suited to handling attacks from large, heavy opponents*, Vandal reasoned. The turtle was glaring at him, angry at having the thrust blocked. Vandal replied with more MP Shots.

"Kwooooooooo!" the turtle bellowed. Having multiple three-foot-wide shots of magical power hammering into its head at close range provided a level of pain that even the boss couldn't ignore. It dragged its face out of the Anti-Attack Barrier, roaring all the while. But it was also far from a killing blow.

"A single one of those is enough to kill a hell hound, and this guy took a whole bunch of them in the face," Vandal commented. "That's one tough turtle."

"I've heard that island turtles often have Resist Magic skills," Zulan offered.

"Resistance, huh. That is a pain in the butt."

The island turtle staggered backward before whipping at him with its long tail. The attack was clearly weaker and slower than the headbutt, but the monster didn't seem to want to get hit in the face by another MP Shot.

Vandal used his Flight to dodge the tail and came down to land on the massive shell. Then he extended his claws from his hands and feet.

"Hand Strike!" He launched the attack, claws and all, striking at the shell. The result was a small scratch on the surface and the sound of a number of his claws breaking off.

"Okay. I expected that. How about a focused Limit Break, and then as much MP as I can force into Physical Strength Enhancement? Now, Hand Strike!"

Vandal had millions upon millions of MP, meaning he wasn't great when it came to fine control. A skilled Magician could control their MP in units of less

than one, but with Vandal . . . even if he concentrated, he was handling tens of thousands of MP.

A dull cracking sound rang out along with a frantic roar from the island turtle. The Hand Strike attack had been boosted by Physical Strength Enhancement that used the same amount of magical power as ten of the best Magicians, if they completely drained themselves dry.

It was more than enough to crack the shell open.



“ . . . Maybe don't try that again,” Vandal muttered to himself.

He had suffered heavily for the attack. The claws on his right hand were shattered. He broke numerous bones, and his muscles were shredded. His baby body had been unable to withstand enhancement from so much MP. If the increase to his strength hadn't been so focused on the claws, his entire arm might have blown off.

But the pain was worth the pleasure it produced because the island turtle was moving more slowly.

“Gah! He dumb again!” Vigaro raged, even as everyone else celebrated the cracking of the shell. The ghoul decided there was no room to play it safe and activated his own Limit Break. Then he used Whip Axe to smash down the shell of the bullet turtle heading toward him. Such a reckless attack against the rotating, hard shell made an impact resonate up the hand holding the axe, numbing his hand.

“Gwaah!” Vigaro cried.

The other bullet turtles had been awaiting just such a moment, and one of them rammed him. The rotating shell crashed into his stomach, making Vigaro stagger.

“Vigaro! You're the one being dumb!” Kachia shouted.

“Gaaaaah! Not . . . dumb!” Vigaro staggered as he held his ground, extending his claws and grabbing the incoming bullet turtle with his left hand. It hurt him, of course, but the turtle also didn't have the speed to shake off his powerful body and sharp claws, so its rotation came to a dead stop. From there, the bullet turtle was nothing than a turtle with a hard shell. Vigaro inserted his

claws into a gap in the shell, finding flesh and finishing the job.

“No hurt! Not dumb!” Vigaro asserted.

“You’re lying!” Kachia replied.

“You’re just using Limit Break and Resist Pain to muscle through it, more like!” Zulan shouted. “But if we can reduce their numbers, we’ll have the advantage!”

Making holes in the turtle’s formation prevented the enemy from working together effectively. Following Vandal and Vigaro’s example, Zulan also threw himself into the fight.

“I can help too!” Even Kachia was pushed to fight harder, switching from a defensive position and starting to stab with her sword.

“Kachia, too much for you!” Braga warned her.

“I’m not dumb either!” she shouted back hotly. “Swift Response!” She used a battle tech to increase her reaction speed, dodging an incoming turtle attack with the barest of movements and unleashing a deadly thrust against the side of its shell.

“Pierce!” It was a Sword Proficiency battle tech active that increase the speed and strength of stabbing attacks. That combined with her increased strength as a ghoul and she should be able to pierce the bullet turtle. At least, that was the plan.

“Huh?!”

Her plan fell apart, along with the pieces of her sword as it shattered in the air. Kachia’s eyes opened wide in shock as another bullet turtle closed in on her. Swift Response let her notice it coming, but Pierce left a big opening. Even though she was aware of the danger, her body couldn’t keep up.

“You won’t be taking me!” she shouted defiantly.

“It won’t be, so don’t worry,” Vandal said, zipping down in front of her as the turtle suddenly froze in place, and smashing it.

“Vandal?!” she exclaimed.

“I can use Magic Sucking Barrier to remove their wind magic. That stops them from moving,” Vandal explained. “Are you okay?”

“Sure, but if you’re down here, that means . . .” Kachia looked up.

“That’s right. The big one is on the loose,” Vandal replied.

The island turtle was crying out over and over. Its rage and pain included the desire to locate Vandal, the small enemy who split its shell, and take him to the grave. The boss steamed forward, with a speed unbecoming a turtle. Zulan and Vigarō were still dealing with the last of the bullet turtles, meaning they couldn’t react in time.

“Child, Kachia, fly away!” Zulan shouted.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I can use Flight again right now. Swooping around . . . really makes my organs hurt . . .” With that, Vandal hunched over on the sand. Kachia tried to pick him up and run. She couldn’t accept Vandal dying after he protected her. She wanted him to escape, even if she paid the ultimate price. But as she lifted him up, she noticed something. The turtle should have been on top of them by now but wasn’t getting any closer at all.

“Huh?” she said, puzzled.

“I can’t use Flight, so I turned the ground into a sand golem,” Vandal explained. “The sand will keep flowing around its feet, so that turtle will expire before it gets anywhere. Let’s just say it wasn’t cheap in terms of MP.”

The moment he crouched down to the ground, Vandal had used his massive volume of MP to turn the sand in the room into a golem, and then controlled it using the Golem Creation skill. The iron turtle was basically stuck on a treadmill made of sand.

I wanted to practice fighting the dragon golem, but that didn't work out, Vandal reflected. *I might have won without using poison, which won't work on the golem, and there's no sand in that chamber either.* He gave a sigh at that thought, but soon picked himself up again.

"If it dies like this, I won't get any experience," Vandal called out to Braga. "Wait until it's too weak to move and then finish it off."

"Okay!"

Once the island turtle was worn out and unable to move, Braga chopped at its neck multiple times to finish it off.

"We'll finish these off as well!" Zulan said, helping Vigaro kill the remaining bullet turtles.

"We'll find a new sword for you once we get back," Vandal said to Kachia, who was still carrying Vandal in her arms, but had now slumped down onto the ground. "If there's something powerful in the vault here, you can use that too . . . hold on, what's wrong?" He noticed that she was crying.

For a moment, he thought he had taken too long to rescue her, that he had watched from the sidelines for too long. He wasn't sure how to react.

But then she broke down into a full-on outburst of tears.

"I'm . . . so sorry!" she barely managed.

Vandal wasn't sure why she was apologizing to him. He wanted to ask about that, but decided he needed to soothe the sobbing Kachia first.

“Before the orcs even caught me, I was at my limit,” she sobbed. “Even after becoming a ghoul, look at me . . .”

“It’s okay. You just got a little panicked,” Vandal said.

Kachia had been an early bloomer. After becoming an adventurer, she quickly gained strength, catching up with those ahead of her . . . and then slammed into a wall. Not a hard wall of steel, but a soft, sucking wall of mud. It got harder and harder for her to level up, and no matter the training or type of combat, her techniques crept up at turtle speed. It looked like her skills would never level up.

At the time, she told herself that she didn’t need to worry. That her strength had passed its rapid growth phase, and now she just had to take it steadily, one step at a time. Even as she told herself these things, however, she lost sight of those she had once caught up with, and those coming from behind moved past her. Newer adventurers looked ready to overtake her too. Talk of female adventurers who had been forced to retire filled her ears at the adventurers’ guild with a new ring of finality to it.

If Kachia had already made her bones, she might have retired as well. But she had only just reached rank D, and everything she had made so far, she spent on buying new gear, living expenses, and paying back her parents. She wasn’t living in luxury, but she only had a few months of living expenses left. She didn’t have the connections to become a personal bodyguard, and the military in the Milg Shield Kingdom didn’t use women on the frontlines.

Her only choice had been to remain as an adventurer, continuing to push herself and hope her hard work would eventually pay off. She wasn’t weak. But the adventurers around her were leaving her behind. She couldn’t land better quests, and the monsters that offered more valuable materials were either too

much for her to handle or already taken out by more powerful adventurers. She even considered finding a suitable man and escaping via marriage.

That was when she was captured by the orcs, plunging her into complete despair. Her only future became giving birth to orc children. If that was to be her lot, she wished she had died during the course of her adventures—back when she still had some kind of hope, some dream for the future.

But the ghouls saved Kachia, and at Vandal's invitation she had decided to become one herself. She thought things might finally change for her. She obtained skills like Brute Strength and Resist Pain, and her stats had increased. She was clearly stronger than when she had been a human. Now she could become stronger. She could take back her pride and her dreams. That was what she had thought.

"But everyone around you still feels stronger than you are, and so you panicked," Vandal surmised. Kachia just continued to sob.

While the baby Vandal was babysitting Kachia, Vigaro and the others loaded the treasure and items from the vault onto Sam's wagon. About the time she was finished, they were ready to leave the dungeon.

Breathing the fresh air of the outside world, Vigaro and the others waited for Vandal to launch into a lecture directed at Kachia.

Sam's wagon was full of their booty, so Kachia was being carried with Vandal by a golem he had created. Braga, for his part, was looking up jealously at that arrangement.

Vigaro didn't understand human affairs, but he knew that worries over failing to improve could lead to a sense of urgency and panic. Making rash mistakes as

a result was the issue. If you got yourself killed, all you were doing was making the grotto weaker, which meant you needed to be able to control those emotions. Give them a telling off, teach them, and make sure they didn't get rash again—that was the role of the elder.

"I understand how you feel. I really do," Vandal said.

But not Vandal's role.

"Vandal?" Kachia tentatively called his name. She was clearly expecting more herself. However, it wasn't a lecture or any kind of blame that eventually emitted from Vandal's mouth.

"I understand where you are coming from."

It was sympathy. The feeling of panic that had been driving Kachia—Vandal understood it himself, all too well.

On Earth, he had studied as hard as he could but hadn't been able to beat the curve by much. At his part-time job, he always got chastised by the others on his shift, and he hadn't been able to make any friends. After finally saving up with his own money to take part in the school trip, he found himself surrounded by kids with happy, healthy lives in the real world, and he struggled to deal with that reality as well.

The feeling of everyone around him rising upward while he sank down—it was a horrible feeling. Even if no one was directly responsible for it . . . although, in Vandal's case, his uncle was responsible.

"I still feel that panic myself," Vandal said. "Goldan is old, sure, but Heinz sounded young. He's only going to get stronger, and I still need to avenge my mother. But what am I doing, compared to him?" At the time, Heinz had been rank B. That was three years ago; he might have reached rank A by now.

Then there was the case of Hiroto Amemiya and the other resurrected, who would be experiencing high-level training and combat on Origin. They wouldn't be burdened with the "unable to carry over experience from previous lives" curse that Vandal had to carry, so everything they were currently learning would be available to them in Ramda. He wasn't sure exactly what their role on Origin had been—something military perhaps. He couldn't predict exactly what kind of experience they were earning, but even putting aside their cheat-level stats, they were sure to have some top-flight skills.

"Then how do you keep so calm?" Kachia asked him.

"In my case, I don't intend to pull any punches. No matter how strong they become, they aren't going to be immortal," Vandal replied. For Goldan and Heinz, he would poison them, or make them sick, or trick and surprise them. Whatever it took to kill them. He didn't care if he had to make thousands of undead and golems and just crush them with sheer numbers. They could call him a coward; he didn't care. Whatever it took.

For the resurrected . . . if they were dead set on killing Vandal, then he would respond in kind. They weren't going to be immortal either, no matter how strong they became. That said, he also wanted to avoid a situation in which he would have to fight all 100 of them. He didn't like them and certainly couldn't forgive them. But if he could discuss things with them and get an apology, he might back off and let them be. Watching from the sidelines as they struggled to fix and develop this pain-in-the-ass world, living the good life with all his new friends, would be revenge enough.

"What about me, then? What should I do?" Kachia asked.

Vandal thought for a moment.

"Maybe put your sword aside for a moment and try training with magic?"

Vandal suggested. “Female ghouls have excellent affinity for magic.” She might end up spreading herself too thin, but she was struggling at the moment as it was. It couldn’t hurt to try something else.

Kachia paused. “Okay, I’ll give it a try. What if it doesn’t work out?”

“If that happens, we can discuss it again.”

Vandal did feel responsible for her, after all. He was the one who asked her and the others if they wanted to become ghouls, literally changing their lives—fully aware that there was no going back. Taking care of them after that simply made sense. That was the kind of person he wished to be. The kind of person who helped out those in need. That was the only way to get through life.

“You’ll lend me an ear again?” she asked.

“Anytime. If magic doesn’t work out, you still have options. You could master fish sauce and miso making.”

“Hmmm. Anything else?” she asked.

“What about a maid, like Saria and Rita?” he asked.

“A maid. I guess that will do . . . for now,” she replied.

Vandal wasn’t sure where that was coming from. Maybe she grew up wanting to be a maid. He couldn’t be sure.

“Okay. That’s given me a boost. I don’t know how well it will turn out, but I’ll try my hand at magic as soon as I get back!”

In any case, Vandal’s pep talk had done the trick.

“Competition for Basdia,” Vigaro said.

“A good thing,” Zulan commented. “Heroes should be sought after.”

“I wish I was sought after,” Braga lamented. “Like Belg.”

Listening to their conversation, Vandal wondered if he had just accidentally set something into motion.

But no matter. For now, he was just looking forward to making that seaweed and bonito miso soup.

Name: Kachia

Rank: 3

Race: Ghoul

Level: 24

Job: Warrior

Job Level: 77

Job History: Apprentice Warrior

Age: 19

——Passive Skills

**[Night Vision] [Resist Pain: Level 1] [Brute Strength: Level 1] [Paralytic
Venom (Claws): Level 1]**

——Active Skills

**[Sword Proficiency: Level 3] [Armor Mastery: Level 1] [Shield Proficiency:
Level 1] [Dismantle: Level 1]**

The End

The Death Mage

BONUS CHAPTER

VANDAL OBSERVATION DIARY

Bonus Chapter: The Vandal Observation Dairy

The day after the black goblin Braga returned to Talosheim from the dungeon expedition, he gathered in the square with his companions, holding a diary in his hands.

“How was the king?” one of them asked.

“He did something cool again,” Braga replied. “Like only the king can.”

“Really? Tell us more!”

“I wish I’d gone with you!”

Braga’s “companions” comprised the other members of the new species who had been born around the same time, including Gobba, Zamed, and Memedigga.

“Okay. Let’s get these details down in the king observation diary,” Braga said.

Gatherings of these companions generally involved writing a document about someone who was like a father to them in some respects and also their king. Someone they didn't quite understand but were completely obsessed with: Vandal.

They had started writing the diary to practice their writing skills at the recommendation of Vandal himself. They used dried bark and leaves as paper, monster fur to make brushes, and crushed up rocks as mineral pigments. At the beginning, they wrote their own diaries, but before long it became clear that Vandal was appearing uncommonly frequently. That led them to decide to divide the two labors: they would keep normal diaries about everyday stuff and then a special diary specifically about Vandal. This was the origin of the Vandal Observation Diary project.

The diary was comprised of drawings and text on the subject of Vandal. It didn't have the authenticity of research by professionals, but the contents were nevertheless quite unique, prompted by the naïve drive of the monsters.

"He made a golem like this," Braga said.

"Hmmm. Hard to tell from your drawing," someone commented.

Braga was updating the diary while discussing the events of the day. He used pictures and text, as best he could, to report back on the magic Vandal had used and the golems he had created.

"Also, King was popular," Braga added.

"King is always very popular. Like Vigaro."

Braga and the gang weren't just paying attention to Vandal's magic but also to the things he said and did. After all, apart from their ghoul mothers, Vandal was the hero they looked up to the most. He could use Golem Creation to repair stone buildings, do math better than the adult ghouls, and knew all sorts of big words. He also knew lots of games and stories. Vandal was a hero to them.

He taught them games and stories from this place "Earth," on top of the simple games like tag and stories for children that already existed here. For Braga and the gang, the important thing was that Vandal was the one who taught them these things.

"The diary is getting big. Let's read it again from the start," Zamed suggested after they finished updating the diary.

"Why?" Braga asked.

"Mom said that revision is important," Zamed said.

“I agree. Let’s revise.”

They flipped back to the beginning.

“The writing and pictures are bad here. Who did these?” Braga asked.

“Everyone. Everyone did them, together,” Zamed reminded him. Around the time the diary started out, they had written everything they could about Vandal: how he hid behind Sam’s wagon when playing hide-and-go-seek; how he stared off into space and talked to people Braga and the others couldn’t see; how he sometimes curled up inside the bones of Skeleton Bear. But the biggest shock of those early days was the discovery that Vandal was also a child.

“I thought King was an adult. Such a surprise!”

“He doesn’t get any bigger. I thought so too.”

“I thought dhampirs were just a small race.”

Braga and the new species grew up so quickly that they had thought Vandal must already be an adult.

“He’s so mature,” Memedigga said. “He teaches us and is good at magic too.”

Once they found out Vandal was a child, the diary had started to include irregular records of his size.

“King is slowly getting bigger,” Braga said.

“He is?” Gobba said.

They weren’t exactly taking measurements, meaning there were some discrepancies in how each of them saw the situation. The bigger races, like the orcas, didn’t sense the changes in Vandal’s size as much as the smaller black goblins and anubis. When Gobba was responsible for sizing, the entries only said, “King small.”

“But there was something more surprising than learning King is a child,” Braga said.

“Right. When we found out King is a man,” Gobba agreed.

Proceeding through the diary, they came to a page where it said, “Vandal is a man!” in huge letters. It wasn’t that the new species had considered him a woman. It was simply that from his appearance and characteristics, they hadn’t paid attention to his gender one way or the other. His gender had just been “King.”

“King is a man, but he doesn’t get muscles. Even though he wants them so badly.”

“He has thin ankles, wrists, and neck. Thinner than you, Braga,” Gobba said.

They couldn’t understand it. Zamed had a chiseled, toned body, while Gobba was more like a pro wrestler, with some fat over his muscles. Vandal would have been happy to have either one.

“More race differences?” Braga suggested. “Bildy and the other ghoul kids grow much more slowly than us.”

“King said something about rules of the world. I didn’t understand,” Memedigga said. She was female, training in magic but also martial arts, giving her a body more muscular than the average woman. Meanwhile Braga, specializing in agility, was the only slender one among them, but even he was lean and compact. He definitely wasn’t a weakling.

“The rules of this world. King knows difficult things,” Gobba said.

“We can’t fight the rules of the world,” Zamed said.

Both monsters tried to sound like they knew what they were talking about. The “rules” they were referring to were things like stats and skills like Brute

Strength that could be affected by modifiers, the factors that had a direct effect on physical things like volume of muscle.

On Ramda, it was possible for a lean, slender-looking individual to beat out a macho opponent in a battle of pure strength. In such a world, surely there was some efficient way to increase the physical volume of muscle?

“I don’t think King understands the rules. If he finds out, we’ll have him teach us,” Braga said.

“Good idea.”

And so these muscley monsters swiftly passed over a topic that meant little to them, with their incredible bodies, and a lot to Vandal, with nothing at all. They continued through the dairy.

“It was around here that King started to run like us,” Zamed said.

“Just before he made the frisbee,” Memedigga said. “That’s fun, isn’t it! I prefer chasing and catching to throwing it.”

Vandal had started to run around on all fours after Zamed taught him. The male ghouls used their long front arms to run like gorillas, but Vandal’s small body couldn’t copy that kind of movement. And so he had created his own way of running on all fours, following the movements of Zamed while using his claws to support himself.

“That made King faster,” Zamed said. “It lets him run up walls too.”

“Fugoh, even I can’t catch him now,” said Gobbo.

A dhampir was faster on four legs than two. Though Vandal spent his days in cultural pursuits, he seemed to be becoming wilder. None of those gathered here made such a delicate distinction.

“Going into dungeons has made King stronger,” Braga said.

“He wasn’t strong before unless he used magic. How was he in the dungeon, Braga?” Zamed asked.

“Strong! Funny, too. He made nice food as well.”

“Fugoh! I wanted to go too!” said Gobba.

Braga and the other new species were, from the perspective of the world, monsters. When they sought to evaluate others, they considered strength as a very important element of that evaluation. They didn’t discriminate against the weak, specifically, but they only respected the strong.

“How strong will King become? Stronger than Borkz?”

“Very strong. He’ll become an adult . . . hmmm, adult king?”

“What will he be like as an adult?”

They all moved to considering what Vandal would look like once he grew up. They had all been so small when they were born and had grown so big so quickly. Vandal would surely grow in much the same way—indeed, even bigger. Braga and the others were sure of it.

“Today, let’s draw King in the future!” Braga suggested.

“Good idea!”

“Count me in!”

The others all quickly agreed, and they each started to draw how they pictured Vandal as an adult on their own leaves and bark.

“How tall? I think . . . between Borkz and Vigaro,” Braga said. That placed him at less than three meters but well over two.

“His claws and fangs will be bigger and will have poison like our moms.”

With that, they added black claws like a carnivorous dinosaur.

“His arms will get longer,” said someone else. “He’s a man, he runs on all fours, and he’s a dhampir but a ghoulish king.” They added long arms, reaching down to the ground even when he was standing straight.

“Oh! Maybe he’ll grow wings!” Memedigga said.

“No, I don’t think so,” Braga replied.

“But he uses magic to fly around a lot. Maybe that will make him grow wings,” Memedigga responded.

“Good point!” Braga said.

Their low mental age and lack of general understanding of how the world worked often created these leaps in logic, which tended to generate even more ideas rather than lead them into a rut.

“Will he have wings like a dragon? A bird? Or a bug, maybe?” Braga asked.

“Hmmm. Who knows. Give him all of them!”

“Oh, and a tail! I bet he grows a tail!”

“Ears! Give him ears like ours!”

“And a nose like ours too. Braga, what about you?”

“No, it’s good like this. He already has ears like ours. Do you think he will change color?”

“I think he’ll stay white. I hope he does!”

The prediction of Vandal’s future continued to take shape.

“Wow.” That was Vandal’s response to the image he was presented with. It was definitely . . . striking.

What made it even worse was how Braga and the others looked so proud of themselves. There was no malice at all as they presented the one image that they proclaimed turned out the best, beaming smiles on their faces.

The image in front of him showed a Vandal bigger than Vigaro, but with body and head still in the proportions of a child. There were fangs jutting out from his mouth and long arms with putrid black claws, and three pairs of wings—leathery dragon, filmy insect, and feathery bird—sprouting from his back. He squinted and realized he even had a snake-like tail. Dog-like ears jutted from the front of his head and his nose looked like a pig’s. His hair and skin were still white, but that only made him look creepier.

“What do you think, King?” Braga asked excitedly.

“. . . Thanks. I’ll do my best to grow up just like this,” Vandal said.

“Great! Can’t wait!”

“We’ve got your back!”

If Talosheim survived as a nation, long into the future, the observation diary created by Braga and the others might become an important historical document for historians of the future. Looking at the grinning faces of Braga and the others, Vandal wondered what kind of expressions those historians would have on their faces when they saw the drawing.

Afterword

To those of you for whom this is the first time, nice to meet you, and welcome back to everyone else. I'm Densuke, the author of this work. Thank you for picking up this book.

During the third volume, the main character traveled to new lands, leading to an adventure different from those he encountered at Ghoul Grotto. He met new characters, restored the city, and trained. There was also more dungeon exploring than we first saw back in volume one.

The group move from the Ghoul Grotto has expanded the size of the setting, and thus expanded the scope of Vandal's activities. I hope you were able to enjoy the everyday life in this new setting.

Physically, of course, Vandal hasn't gotten much bigger yet. My plan was to have him age roughly one year with each volume, but I'm starting to think that pacing might have been a little too slow! Still, if he was to grow up too quickly, then one of his targets, High Priest Goldan, would probably pass away from natural causes, so I'm locked into this now.

The faction of vampires who worship the Demon Gods also made their first proper appearance. One of them is Eleonora, who even got to be featured on the cover. In the previous volume, the vampires only appeared via bat familiars. This important group has a deep connection to our dhampir hero, so look forward to their appearances in the future.

Undead characters also appeared in this volume. I was getting some complaints from readers asking me where all the zombies were. Our main character makes allies with the undead, after all, so hopefully this satisfies

everyone. I tried to make their hunger for flesh and battle come across, although you won't find them biting any humans.

We also can't overlook all the actions and growth of the existing characters. They rank up and provide backup for our hero. There's a reason I've managed to write so smoothly all this time—because I hope you'll continue to follow their adventures!

I managed to write the afterword for a second time without having to go for a walk! That's helped by the fact that it's late December when I write this, meaning the cold is keeping me inside. Stay warm and healthy, everyone!

To the staff at Hifumishobo and to my editor, who all worked so hard to realize this book, to Ban! for all the wonderful illustrations, to everyone else involved in this publication, and to my readers for all their support of *The Death Mage*—thank you all so much. I hope to see you again next volume!

-Densuke

Glossary

Characters

Borkz

The undead remains of Sword King Borkz, formerly an A-rank adventurer. His body is possessed by his own soul, meaning his rank and skills are still elite. But he has done little but watch over the audience chamber since becoming undead, so his level is low and he is weaker than he was in life.

Borkz lost his favored arm, his sword was shattered in half and thus rendered useless, and his armor was left in tatters, meaning he could no longer effectively use an array of skills such as Sword King Tech, Attack Up With Sword Equipped (Large), and Defense Up With Non-Metallic Armor (Medium).

As a consequence, when he first appeared, while he was rank 9, he fought at a rank 7 level and could have potentially lost to the Noble Orc Bugogan. However, his focus on powerful special attacks meant that he had a better chance of breaking through Vandal's defenses, making him appear to be more of a threat.

Vandal has since restored his arm and given him Bugogan's demon sword, restoring abilities suited to his rank. Once he adapts to being undead, he should be able to fight beyond even his current rank.

A Zombie Hero is said to be a monster created when someone who obtained the "Hero" title during life remains true to it until the moment of their death. They tend to vary in rank, with confirmed individuals ranging from rank 4 up to 10. Generally, individuals who have already become a different type of undead

will not rank up into a Zombie Hero.

In the temple of Alda, god of law and life, defeating a Zombie Hero is taught to be the greatest respect and honor that one can pay to the soul of a dead hero. Doing so is a great source of fame and renown, meaning as soon as a Zombie Hero is discovered, many adventurers immediately target it. Due to the circumstances of their creation, many Zombie Heroes have expensive gear and possessions, while their bones and other materials can be used in powerful alchemy. Not only fame but also an infusion of cash awaits the adventurer who defeats one.

Kachia

When Kachia was a human, she held down a stable position as a rank-D adventurer. However, she only had sword-related skills and training was going slowly, so she hit a bit of a wall and wasn't sure how to proceed.

After becoming a ghoul, she acquired passive skills and the effects of Vandal's Enhance Brethren, increasing her stats. Still, her fighting style hasn't caught up with those changes, and she isn't yet making full use of her abilities.

Monsters

Anubis

A kobolt variant, created by receiving death attribute magic while still in the womb. Anubis have a basic rank of 3 and exceed kobolts' abilities in every capacity including intellect. They lack kobolts' claws on their hands and feet, but this allows them to skillfully use weapons.

They are born with Night Vision and Resist Maladies skills, while many of them also have high MP counts and a better aptitude for magic than regular kobolts.

Their sex drive and fertility are lower than those of kobolts, as they give birth to at most three babies, which take ten months to reach maturity, compared to the three months required for kobolts.

They have black-haired dog heads and tails, while the rest of their body looks like a dark-skinned human. If they could hide those features, they could potentially pass as human.

Their life expectancy can currently only be estimated, but it is thought to be around double that of the thirty-year lifespan of a normal kobolt. They have only just emerged as a race, so it is unknown what higher species might exist. Reporting their existence to the adventurers' guild with suitable proof would earn a considerable reward, but at the moment there is no real way to do so.

Orcas

An orc variant, created by receiving death attribute magic while still in the womb. Has a basic rank of 4.

Orcas share orcs' muscular capacity, but exceed orcs in terms of durability, endurance, agility, and, by a wide margin, intellect. Both possess skills such as Night Vision, Brute Strength, Physical Resistance, and Gluttony. As a result, once fully grown, orcas are more powerful and hardy than a fully equipped orc, even when completely naked themselves. They have a lower aptitude for reproduction than orcs, reproducing hardly more effectively than humans.

They look like overweight humans with the head of boar, covered in bristling

black or gray fur. At the moment, only males exist. The orcas' lifespan is estimated somewhere around the same length as humans. They have only just emerged as a race and so it is unknown what higher species might exist. Reporting their existence to the adventurers' guild with suitable proof would earn a considerable reward, but at the moment there is no real way to do so.

Living Dead

A unique form of undead created by using life attribute magic to provide artificial life to a fresh corpse prior to the onset of rigor mortis. The result is a soulless sack of meat that nevertheless retains biological functions such as breathing and having a pulse.

As this is still a corpse and has no soul, a Living Dead only has the most rudimentary instincts and won't attack the living like a zombie. They also lose all the skills they held in life, apart from those innate to the race they were born as. This has led a small number of academics to postulate that skills reside with the soul and not the body.

They are easily defeated by any of the ways you might normally incapacitate a human. They are rank 0 and cannot match the threat of even a slime or goblin. Furthermore, they do not occur naturally in demon barrens or dungeons. All Living Dead have been created by a Magician's efforts; in fact, that is the only way to create them.

As they have no souls, they make the perfect vessels for Magicians to use as their familiars. When being operated, Living Dead can exhibit unexpected abilities beyond those of a reanimated corpse and can become dangerous foe.

There is one tale of a king who suddenly passed away getting turned into a

Living Dead in order to pretend that he was still alive. There are also rumors of a noble who died young without an heir being turned into a Living Dead in order to produce one.

Corpses created via injuries that prevent the biological functions of life, including blood loss, cannot be turned into Living Dead. That means, with a few exceptions, they can generally only be created from those who die from sickness or sudden natural causes. Furthermore, Living Dead cannot be created from monsters, due to the magical power residing in their corpses.

Lich

This is the name given to all undead that can still use the magic they had access to in life from the moment of their transformation. In some cases, masters of specific attributes have been known to turn themselves into undead and retain almost all of their mental capacity and magical abilities from when they were alive. In other cases, undead end up being able to do little more than a beginner Magician.

Nuaza was only an apprentice when he was killed and hasn't exactly been hitting the books in the years since. His abilities remain much as they were when he was alive. This means that while he is a Lesser Lich, he is an undead in the strange position of probably being stronger if equipped with a melee weapon. His mummification makes him look like a wrinkled old man, but he was still in his late 20s when he passed. Some of the other undead in Talosheim mock him for his youth.

He learned the Stone Working skill after he became undead. He acquired it during the 200 years it took him to repair the temple that was destroyed by the Milg Shield Kingdom. In addition to reaching a general-level threshold, a Lesser

Lich requires a magic skill of at least level 4 in order to rank up.

Skeleton Knight

Regular Skeleton Knights are human knights who were turned into undead. In the case of Vandal's skeleton, the base is that of a mouse soul, to which other souls were then added, among which were the souls of loyal knights, which triggered that specific transformation.

Vandal's Skeleton Knight looks the same as before but has enhanced stats and intelligence. Some of its skills that weren't increasing even after acquiring experience before have now leveled up. It also acquired the skill Enhance Loyalty, a passive ability learned by Knights. This skill provides enhancement to stats when the holder is following the orders of one to whom they have sworn loyalty, typically their lord. In the case of Vandal's skeleton, that means Vandal.

Most Skeleton Knights have excellent fighting and leadership skills. Leading others allows them to rank up into the rank 5 Skeleton General and rank 6 Skeleton Lord, but if they serve under someone with immense power either before or after their deaths—someone like a king or emperor—they may also rank up to undead with noble titles in their name, such as Skeleton Baron.

Ghoul Amazon

If a ghoul female, with her general aptitude for magic, instead chooses to train with physical weapons and continues to do so after ranking up first to a Ghoul Warrior, she may then rank up to Ghoul Amazon.

Her appearance hardly changes apart from the addition of a tattoo-like pattern of lines across her body. Her physical abilities are considerably

enhanced, while the lines give her Resist Magic. Her own magical abilities also power up.

A considerably rare type of ghoul, a single grotto will never have more than one of them. They often become leaders in their group, with the presence of a Ghoul Amazon generally increasing the standing of all women in her grotto. Although the truth of the matter is unknown, there have been rumors of a female-only tribe of ghouls, living deep in the demon barrens and led by a Ghoul Amazon.

Nothing is known about rank-ups beyond Ghoul Amazon. It is thought that training with both weapons and magic would likely be the key to reaching a yet higher species.

Skills

Sword King Tech

One of the higher skills on the Sword Proficiency tree. It can be earned by getting Sword Proficiency to level 10 and earning further experience. Other confirmed skills obtained in this way include Sword Saint Tech, Sword Emperor Tech, Sword God Tech, and Demon Blade Tech. The characteristics and strengths of these higher skills remain vaguely defined due to the small number of people who have achieved them.

The Amidd Empire's hero Bellwood is said to have acquired the Holy Sword God Tech, but this rumor could just be political and religious maneuvering. There is no way of knowing what his skill was called.

There are similar techs for other proficiency skills, including spear, axe, and

brawling proficiency. Those holding these skills are always at least rank A adventurers.

Densuke

Resides in Saitama Prefecture. Has loved light novels since his childhood and has been writing them himself for close to twenty years. He was aiming to become an author of orthodox fantasy but kept getting distracted along the way. After many twists and turns, he won an award during the Fourth Internet Novel Awards and achieved his debut as an author. He likes pizza and chicken skin *senbei* and works out every day. He likes undead heroines the best.

The Death Mage Volume 3

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